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OPERATION MOON ROCKET



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Dedicated to The Men of the Secret Services of the United States of
America

CHAPTER 1

AT 6:10 A.M. EST, May 16, the final countdown began.

Flight directors sat tensely before their control consoles at Houston, Texas, and Cape Kennedy, Florida. Ringing the earth was a fleet of tracking ships, a net of deep-space radio antennas and a number of hovering communications satellites. Worldwide television coverage began at 7:00 A.M. EST, and those who had risen early to witness the event heard the Flight Director at Mission Control Center in Houston announce: “Everything is green and go.”

Eight months earlier the Apollo spacecraft had been man-tested in orbit. Six months earlier the lunar landing craft had been space-tested. Two months after that the huge Saturn 5 rocket had made its unmanned flight debut. Now the three sections of the moon-ship had been joined and were ready for their first manned orbit—the final test before the actual moon flight itself.

The three astronauts had started their day with a quick medical examination, followed by the customary steak-and-eggs breakfast. They were then driven by jeep across a bleak spit of sand and scrub called Merritt Island, out past those artifacts of an earlier space age—the launching pads of Mercury and Gemini—and past an orange grove that had somehow survived encircling technology to launching complex 39, a massive concrete platform half the size of a football field.

Chief pilot of the upcoming flight was Lieutenant Colonel Norwood “Woody” Liscombe, a gray-haired, laconic man in his early forties, a sober, no-nonsense veteran of the Mercury and Gemini programs. He squinted up at the haze hanging high over the launching area as the three men strolled from the jeep to the ready room. “Fine,” he said in his slow Texas drawl. “It’ll help keep the sun out of our eyes during lift-off.”

His crewmates nodded. Lieutenant Colonel Ted Green, also a Gemini veteran, pulled out a colorful red bandana and mopped his forehead. “Must be up in the nineties already,” he said. “If it gets any hotter they can just pour olive oil in on top of us.”

Navy Lieutenant Commander Doug Albers laughed nervously. Boyish-looking, earnest, at thirty-two he was the youngest member of the team, the only one who hadn’t yet been in space.

In the ready room the astronauts listened to a final mission briefing, then got into their space suits.

Out on the launching complex the pad crew had begun to fuel the Saturn 5 rocket. Because of the heat, the fuel and oxidizers had to be

cooled to temperatures lower than usual and the operation was running twelve minutes late.

Above them, at the top of the fifty-five-story gantry elevator, a five-man crew of Connelly Aviation technicians had just given the thirty-ton Apollo capsule a final check. The Connelly Company of Sacramento was NASA's chief contractor on the \$23 billion project, and a good eight percent of the personnel at the Kennedy moon port were employees of the California aerospace firm.

Gantry-crew chief Pat Hammer, a heavyset, square-faced man wearing white coveralls, a white baseball cap and hexagonal frameless polaroids, paused as he and his crew crossed the catwalk separating the Apollo capsule from the service tower. "You guys go on ahead," he called out. "I'm going to have a last look around."

One of the crew turned, shaking his head. "I've been through fifty launchings with you, Pat," he yelled, "but I've never seen you nervous till this one."

"You can't be too careful," Hammer said as he climbed back into the capsule.

He glanced around the interior, getting his bearings amid the maze of gauges, dials, switches, lights and toggles. Then, seeing what he wanted, he moved swiftly to his right, dropped to all fours and slithered under the astronauts' couches toward a bundle of wires that ran beneath a storage door.

He slipped his polaroids off, took a leather case from his hip pocket, opened it and put on a pair of plain rimless glasses. He pulled a pair of asbestos gloves from his back pocket and placed them next to his head. From the second and third fingers of the right glove he extracted a pair of wire cutters and a file.

He was breathing heavily now and beads of perspiration had started to trickle down his forehead. He slipped the gloves on, carefully chose a wire and proceeded to cut partially through it. Then he put the cutters down and started stripping the heavy Teflon insulation away until more than an inch of the glistening copper strands lay bare. He filed through one of the strands and peeled it away, bending it to within three inches of the soldered joint of some ECS piping ...

The astronauts moved across the concrete platform of complex 39 in their heavy moon suits. They paused to shake hands with some of the launching crewmen and Colonel Liscombe grinned when one of them handed him a three-foot mockup of a kitchen match. "When you're ready, Colonel," the technician said, "just strike it against a rough surface. Our rockets will do the rest."

Liscombe and the other astronauts nodded, grinning through their face plates, then moved to the gantry elevator and rose swiftly to the

sterilized “white room” at spacecraft level.

Inside the capsule Pat Hammer had just finished filing through the soldered joint of the environment control piping. Quickly he gathered up his tools and gloves and crawled out from beneath the couches. Through the open hatchway he saw the astronauts emerge from the “white room” and start across the twenty-foot catwalk toward the stainless-steel hull of the capsule.

Hammer climbed to his feet, hurriedly stuffing the gloves into his back pocket. He forced a smile onto his lips as he stepped out of the hatchway. “Everything’s A-OK, boys,” he called out. “Have a good trip.”

Colonel Liscombe suddenly stopped and swung toward him. Hammer winced, dodging an invisible blow. But the astronaut was grinning, holding the huge match out to him. His lips behind his face plate moved, saying, “Here, Pat—next time you want to start a fire.”

Hammer stood there, the match in his left hand, a smile frozen on his face as the three astronauts shook hands with him and climbed through the hatchway.

They hooked up their silvery nylon space suits to the environmental control system and lay back on their couches, waiting for them to become pressurized. Command pilot Liscombe was stretched out on the left under the flight-control panel. Green, assigned the job of navigator, was in the middle, and Albers was on the right where the communications equipment was located.

At 7:50 A.M., pressurization was completed. The airtight double hatch plates were sealed and the atmosphere inside the spacecraft filled with oxygen and pressurized at sixteen pounds per square inch.

Now began the familiar routine, an infinitely detailed run-through scheduled to last more than five hours.

At the end of four and a half, the countdown had been stopped twice, both times for minor “glitches.” Then, at countdown-minus-fourteen-minutes, the procedure was stopped once again—this time because of static in the communications channels between the spacecraft and technicians at the operations center. When it had cleared, the countdown scenario continued. The next steps called for switching of electrical equipment and checking the Glycol—the coolant used in the ship’s environmental control system.

Commander Albers flicked a switch labeled 11-CT. Impulses from the switch ran through the wire, bridging the section from which the Teflon insulation had been removed. Two steps later Colonel Liscombe turned a valve that sent highly combustible Ethylene Glycol through an alternate pipeline—and through a soldered joint which had been carefully filed through. The instant that the first drop of Glycol splashed onto the bare, overheated wire marked the moment when the

mists of eternity opened for the three men aboard Apollo AS-906.

At 12:01:04 P.M. EST, technicians watching a TV monitor at Pad 39 saw flames leap up around Commander Albers' couch on the right side of the cabin.

At 12:01:14 P.M. a voice from inside the capsule cried: "Fire in the spacecraft!"

At 12:01:20 P.M. those watching the TV monitor saw Colonel Liscombe trying to free himself from his safety harness. He twisted forward from his couch, glanced down toward the right. A voice, presumably his, shouted: "Pipe's been cut... Glycol leaking. . (The rest garbled.)

At 12:01:28 P.M. Lieutenant Commander Albers' telemetered heart rate shot up. He could be seen covered with flames. A voice, thought to be his, screamed: "Get us out of here ... we're burning up ..."

At 12:01:29 P.M. a wail of fire shot up, blotting the scene from view. TV monitors went dark. Cabin pressure and heat quickly rose. No other intelligible communications were received, though screams of pain were heard.

At 12:01:32 P.M. cabin pressure reached twenty-nine pounds per square inch. The spacecraft was ruptured by the pressure. Technicians standing on a level with the craft's windows saw a blinding flash. Heavy smoke began to seep from the capsule. Members of the gantry crew sprinted across the catwalk leading to the craft, tried desperately to loosen the hatch cover. They were driven back by the intense heat and smoke.

Inside the capsule the effect was that of a fierce wind springing up. White-hot air roared through the rupture, enveloping the astronauts in a cocoon of bright fire, shriveling them up like insects in a heat estimated at more than two thousand degrees ...

The voice in the darkened room said, "Quick thinking by the gantry-crew chief prevented a tragedy of even greater dimensions."

A picture flashed on the screen and Hammer found himself staring into his own face. "This is Patrick J. Hammer," the TV news commentator continued, "a Connelly Aviation Company technician, forty-eight years old, a father of three. While others stood frozen, immobilized by horror, he had the presence of mind to press the control button that triggered the launching escape system... ."

"Look! Look! It's Daddy!" piped the innocent, reed-thin voices in the darkness behind him. Hammer winced. Automatically his eyes swept the room, checking the double-bolted door, the drawn blinds. He heard his wife say, "Shush, babies. Let's listen ..."

The TV commentator was pointing now to a diagram of the Apollo-Saturn 5. "The escape system is designed to catapult the capsule to a

parachute landing clear of the pad in case of an emergency during lift-off. Although the action was unable to save the astronauts, Hammer's quick thinking kept the fire in the capsule from spreading to the third-stage rocket below the Lunar Module. If it had spread, the thunderous combustion of eight and a half million gallons of refined kerosene and liquid oxygen would have destroyed the entire Kennedy Space Center, plus the surrounding communities of Port Canaveral, Cocoa Beach and Rockledge... ."

"Mommy, I'm tired. Let's go to bed." It was Timmy, his youngest, just turned four that Saturday.

Hammer hunched forward, staring at the TV set in the cluttered front room of his Cocoa Beach bungalow. His rimless glasses glittered. The perspiration stood out on his forehead. His eyes clung desperately to the TV commentator's face, but it was Colonel Liscombe who looked back at him, grinning, handing him the match ...

The filthy smell of burning iron and paint filled the room. The walls bent in toward him like a huge blister. A great sheet of flame spread past him and Liscombe's face melted before his eyes, leaving only scorched, roasting flesh crawling with heat blisters, eyes bursting within a calcinated skull, the reek of burning bones ...

"Pat, what's wrong?"

His wife was leaning over him, her face pale and drawn. He must have cried out. He shook his head. "Nothing," he said. She didn't know. He could never tell her.

Suddenly the telephone rang. He jumped. He'd been expecting it all night. "I'll get it," he said. The commentator was saying, "Nine hours after the tragic event, investigators are still sifting through the charred debris . .

It was Hammer's boss, Pete Rand, the launching crew supervisor. "Better come in, Pat," he said. His voice sounded funny. "There are a couple of questions ..."

Hammer nodded, closing his eyes. It had only been a matter of time. Colonel Liscombe had yelled, "Pipe's been cut." Cut, not broken, and Hammer knew why, could see the case containing his polaroid glasses lying there next to the solder dust and the Teflon shavings.

He had been a good American, a loyal employee of Connelly Aviation for fifteen years. He had worked hard, risen from the ranks, taken pride in his work. He had hero-worshipped the astronauts who had ridden his handiwork into space. And then—because he loved his family—he had joined the commonwealth of the vulnerable, the exposed.

"Yes, all right." Hammer said it quietly, his hand shielding the mouthpiece. "I want to talk about it. But I need help. I need police protection."

The voice at the other end sounded surprised. "Okay, Pat, sure. That can be arranged."

"I want them to guard my wife and kids," said Hammer. "I'm not leaving the house until they get here."

He put the receiver down and stood there, his hand shaking. Sudden fear twisted his stomach. He had committed himself—but there was no other way. He glanced at his wife. Timmy had fallen asleep in her lap. He could see the boy's tousled blond hair wedged between the couch and her elbow. "They want me at work," he said vaguely. "I'll have to go in."

The front doorbell's muted chimes rang. "At this hour?" she said. "Who could it be?"

"I asked the police to stop by."

"Police?"

Strange how fear telescoped time. It seemed less than a minute ago that he'd been on the phone. He walked over to the window, cautiously parted the Venetian blinds. The dark sedan at the curb had a dome light on the roof, a whip antenna on the side. The three men on the front stoop were in uniform, with holstered weapons on their hips. He opened the door.

The one in the lead was big, browned from the sun, with light carrot-colored hair brushed straight back and an affable grin on his face. He wore a blue shirt, bow tie and riding breeches and carried a white crash helmet under his arm. "Howdy," he drawled. "Your name Hammer?" Hammer was staring at the uniform. He didn't recognize it. "We're county officers," the redhead, explained. "The NASA people gave us a call . . .

"Oh, okay, fine." Hammer stepped aside to let them in.

The man directly behind the redhead was short, lean, dark, with dead gray eyes. A deep scar encircled his neck. He had a towel wrapped around his right hand. Hammer glanced at him with sudden alarm. Then he saw the five-gallon drum of gasoline the third policeman was holding. His eyes darted to the man's face. His mouth wrenched open. He knew at that moment that he had begun to die. The features beneath the white crash helmet were flat, with high cheekbones and slanting eyes.

His syringe in the redhead's hand spat out a long needle with a tiny sigh of escaping air. Hammer gave a grunt of pain and surprise. His left hand flew to his arm, fingers clawing at the sharp agony embedded in the tortured muscle. Then he slowly toppled forward.

His wife screamed, tried to rise from the couch. The man with the scarred neck came through the room like a wolf, his mouth wet and gleaming. An ugly straight-edge razor protruded from the towel. As the blade flashed down, she threw herself across the children. Blood

sprang from the savage red gash that he drew across her larynx, choking off her scream. The children weren't fully awake. Their eyes were open, but still blurred with sleep. They died quickly, silently, without a struggle.

The third man had gone straight to the kitchen. He opened the oven, turned on the gas, then disappeared down the steps into the hurricane shelter. When he returned the gasoline drum was empty.

The redhead had removed the needle from Hammer's arm and had slipped it into his pocket. Now he dragged him over to the couch, dipped Hammer's lifeless right index finger in the pool of blood rapidly forming under it and guided the finger across the bungalow's whitewashed wall.

He paused every few letters to dip the finger in fresh blood. When the message was complete, the other two men looked at it and nodded. The one with the scarred neck pressed the handle of the blood-soaked razor into Hammer's right hand and all three helped carry him into the kitchen. They placed his head in the open oven, took a last look around, then filed out the front door, the last man triggering the tumbler of the snap lock so that the house was locked from inside.

The whole operation had taken less than three minutes.

CHAPTER 2

NICHOLAS J. HUNTINGTON CARTER, N3 for AXE, leaned on one elbow and looked down at the lovely, sunkissed redhead who lay on the sand beside him.

Her skin was tobacco brown and she wore a pale yellow bikini. Her lipstick was pink. Her legs were long, shapely, her hips round and firm, and the mounded V of her bikini looked up at him and the proud breasts in the tight cups were two more eyes.

Her name was Cynthia something and she was a native Floridian, the girl in all the travelogues. Nick called her Cindy, and she knew Nick as "Sam Harmon," an admiralty lawyer from Chevy Chase, Maryland. Whenever "Sam" was on vacation down Miami Beach way, they made a point of getting together.

There was a dew of sweat from the hot sun beneath her closed eyes and at her temples. She sensed him looking at her and the wet eyelashes parted; the tawny eyes, big and far-away, looked up with remote curiosity into his.

"What do you say we flee this vulgar display of half-cooked flesh?" he grinned, showing enviably white teeth.

"What do you have in mind?" she countered. A faint smile lurked in the corners of her mouth.

"The two of us, alone, back in suite twelve-eight."

Excitement began to grow in her eyes. "Again?" she murmured. Her eyes trailed warmly over his brown, muscular body. "All right, yes, that is a nice idea ..."

A shadow suddenly fell across them. A voice said, "Mr. Harmon?"

Nick swung onto his back. A funereal man in black, in silhouette, bent over him, blotting out part of the sky. "You are wanted on the telephone, sir. By the blue entrance, phone number six."

Nick nodded and the assistant bell captain went away, treading slowly, cautiously through the sand to preserve the shine on his black oxfords, looking like a dark omen of death amid the riot of colors on the beach. Nick climbed to his feet. "I'll only be a minute," he said, but he didn't believe it.

"Sam Harmon" had no friends, no relations, no life of his own. Only one man knew of his existence, knew that he was in Miami Beach at this moment, at this particular hotel, on the second week of his first vacation in over two years. A tough old man in Washington.

Nick walked through the sand toward the Surfway Hotel's entrance. He was a big man, slim-hipped and wide at the shoulders, with the calm eyes of a top athlete who has dedicated his life to

challenge. Feminine eyes swiveled behind sunglasses, taking stock. Thick, slightly unruly dark hair. An almost perfect profile. Laugh lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth. Feminine eyes liked what they saw and followed him, openly interested. There was a promise of excitement in the sinewy, tapering body, and of danger, too.

"Sam Harmon" fell away from Nick with every step he took. Eight days of love, laughter and idleness vanished stride by stride, and by the time he reached the hotel's cool, dark interior he was his usual working self—special agent Nick Carter, top operative of AXE, America's super-secret counterintelligence agency.

The telephones were to the left of the blue entrance, a row of ten mounted on the wall, with soundproof barriers between them. Nick went to number six and picked up the receiver. "Harmon here."

"Hello, my boy, just passing through. Thought I'd see how you were getting on."

Nick's dark eyebrows rose. Hawk—on an open line. Surprise number one. Here in Florida. Surprise number two. "Everything's fine, sir. First vacation I've had in some time," he added pointedly.

"Splendid, splendid." The head of AXE said it with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. "Are you free for dinner?" Nick glanced at his watch. At 4:00 P.M.? The tough old bird seemed to read his thoughts. "It will be the dinner hour by the time you reach Palm Beach," he added. "The Bali Hai, Worth Avenue. The cuisine is Polynesian-Chinese, the maitre d's name is Don Lee. Just tell him you're dining with Mr. Byrd. Fivish is fine. We'll have time for a drink."

Surprise number three. Hawk was strictly a steak and potatoes man. He hated Oriental food. "Fine," said Nick. "But I'll need time to get organized. Your call was rather ... unexpected."

"The young lady's already been notified." Hawk's voice was suddenly crisp and businesslike. "She was told that you were called away on business unexpectedly. Your suitcase is packed and in the car, your street clothes are on the front seat. You've already checked out at the desk."

Nick fumed at the highhandedness of it all. "I left my cigarettes and sunglasses out on the beach," he snapped. "Mind if I get them?"

"You'll find them in the glove compartment. I take it you haven't been reading the papers?"

"No." Nick let it go at that. His idea of a vacation was to sweat the poisons of everyday life out of his system. Those poisons included newspapers, radios, TV, anything that carried news of the outside world.

"Then I suggest you switch the car radio on," said Hawk, and N3 knew from his voice that something big was up.

He moved the Lamborghini 350 GT through the gearbox. The heavy traffic was pointed toward Miami and he had his half of U.S. 1 largely to himself. North through Surfside, Hollywood and Boca Raton he sped, past the endless procession of motels, gas stations and fruit juice stands.

There was nothing else on the radio. It was as if war had been declared, as if the President had died. All regular programs had been canceled as the nation honored its fallen astronauts.

Nick swung onto the Kennedy Causeway in West Palm Beach, made a left into Ocean Boulevard and headed north toward Worth Avenue, main drag of the town society columnists called the "platinum watering hole."

He couldn't figure it out. Why had the head of AXE chosen Palm Beach for their meeting? And why the Bali Hai? Nick reviewed what he knew about the place. It was said to be the most exclusive restaurant in the United States. If your name wasn't in the Social Register, or if you weren't fabulously rich, a foreign dignitary, a senator or a high State Department official, you could forget about it. You wouldn't get in.

Nick made a right into the street of expensive dreams, swinging past the local branches of Cartier's and Van Cleef & Arpels with their small vitrines displaying rocks the size of the Kohinoor Diamond. The Bali Hai was situated between the elegant old Colony Hotel and the ocean front, and was painted to look like a pineapple rind.

An attendant swept his car away and the maitre d' bowed obsequiously at the mention of "Mr. Byrd." "Ah yes, Mr. Harmon, you were expected," he murmured. "If you will follow me, please."

He was led along a leopard-striped banquette to where the leathery old man with the rustic appearance and gimlet eyes sat at a table. Hawk rose as Nick approached, holding out his hand. "My boy, glad you could make it." He seemed rather unsteady. "Sit down, sit down." The captain pulled the table out and Nick did. "A vodka martini?" said Hawk. "Our friend here, Don Lee, makes the very best." He patted the maitre d's arm.

Lee beamed. "Always a pleasure to serve you, Mr. Byrd." He was a young, dimpled Hawaiian Chinese, wearing a tuxedo with a colorful lei draped around his neck. He chuckled, adding, "But General Sweet accused me last week of being an agent of the Vermouth industry."

Hawk chuckled. "Dick's always been a grouser."

"I'll have a straight scotch," said Nick. "On the rocks." He glanced around the restaurant. It was paneled in bamboo to table level, with wall-to-wall mirroring above that and wrought-iron pineapples on each table. A horseshoe-shaped bar was at one end and beyond it, enclosed in glass, the discotheque—at present the "in" spot for the

Golden Youth of the Rolls-Royce set. Elaborately jeweled women and men with smooth, well-fed faces sat at tables here and there, picking at their food in the vague half-light.

A waiter arrived with their drinks. He wore a colorful aloha shirt over black trousers. His flat Oriental features were expressionless as Hawk upset the martini that had just been placed in front of him. "I take it you've caught up with the news," said Hawk, watching the liquid disappear into the damp tablecloth. "A national tragedy of the gravest dimensions," he added, pulling the toothpick out of the olive that had spilled from the drink and beginning to jab at it absent-mindedly. "It will delay the moon program at least two years. Perhaps longer, considering the mood the public is in at present. And their representatives have caught the mood." He glanced up. "That Senator what's-his-name, the chairman of the subcommittee on space," he said. "He wants the program delayed at least five years to make certain no more lives are lost."

The waiter returned with a fresh tablecloth and Hawk abruptly changed the subject. "Of course I don't get down too often," he said, popping the remains of the olive into his mouth. "Once a year the Belle Glade Club has a pre-duck-hunting banquet here. I try always to make that."

Still another surprise. The Belle Glade Club, Palni Beach's most exclusive. Money wouldn't get you in; and if you were in, you might suddenly find yourself out for some obscure reason. Nick peered at the man who sat across from him. Hawk looked like a farmer or perhaps the editor of a small-town newspaper. Nick had known him a long time. Intimately, he'd thought. Their relationship had been very near to that of father and son. Yet this was the first inkling he'd had that Hawk's background was a social one.

Don Lee arrived with a fresh martini. "Would you like to order now?"

"Perhaps my young friend would," said Hawk, speaking with exaggerated care. "I'm fine." He glanced at the menu that Lee held in front of him. "It's all glorified chop suey to me, Lee. You know that."

"I can have a steak ready for you in five minutes, Mr. Byrd."

"That sounds good to me," said Nick. "Make it rare."

"All right, two," Hawk snapped testily. When Lee had gone, he asked suddenly, "Of what earthly use is the moon?" Nick noticed that his S's were beginning to slur. Hawk drunk? Unheard of—yet he gave every indication. Martinis weren't his drink. One scotch and water before dinner was his usual fare. Had the deaths of the three astronauts somehow gotten under that grizzled old skin?

"The Russians know," Hawk said, without waiting for an answer. "They know minerals will be found there unknown to students of this

planet's rocks. They know that if nuclear war destroys our technology, it will never recover because the raw materials that would enable a new civilization to evolve have been exhausted. But the moon— its a great floating ball of raw, unknown resources. And mark my words, space treaty or no, the first power to land there will eventually control all of it!"

Nick sipped his drink. Had he been dragged away from his vacation to attend a lecture on the importance of the moon program? When Hawk finally paused, Nick said quickly, "Where do we fit into all of this?"

Hawk glanced up, surprised. Then he said, "You've been on vacation. I forgot. When was your last briefing?"

"Eight days ago."

"Then you haven't heard that the Cape Kennedy fire was sabotage?"

"No, the radio reports didn't mention that."

Hawk shook his head. "The public doesn't know yet. Perhaps they never will. There's been no final decision on that as yet."

"Any idea who did it?"

"It's quite definite. Man named Patrick Hammer. He was the gantry-crew chief ..."

Nick's eyebrows rose. "The news reports are still touting him as the hero of the whole affair."

Hawk nodded. "The investigators narrowed it down to him in a matter of hours. He asked for police protection. But before they could get to his house he killed his wife and three children and put his head in the oven." Hawk took a long swig of his martini. "Very messy," he muttered. "He slit their throats, then wrote a confession on the wall with their blood. Said he'd planned the whole thing so he could be a hero, but that he couldn't live with himself and didn't want his family to live with the shame of it, either."

"Very thoughtful of him," said Nick dryly.

They were silent while the waiter served their steaks. When he had gone away Nick said, "I still don't see where we enter the picture. Or is there more?"

"There is," said Hawk. "There's the airplane crash that killed the Gemini 9 crew a few years ago, the first Apollo disaster, the loss of the SV-5D re-entry vehicle from Van-denberg Air Force Base last June. There's the explosion of the J2A rocket test facility in the Air Force's Arnold Engineering Development Center in Tennessee in February, and there are the dozens of other accidents that have been logged in since the project began. The FBI, NASA Security, and now even the CIA, have been investigating each of them and they've reached the conclusion that most, perhaps all, are the result of sabotage."

Nick picked silently at his steak, mulling it over. "Hammer couldn't have been in all those places at once," he said finally.

"Exactly. And that last message he scrawled—strictly a red herring. Hammer used the hurricane shelter of his bungalow as a workshop. Before killing himself, he soaked the place in gasoline. He apparently hoped a spark from the doorbell would ignite the escaping gas and blow the whole house up. It didn't, though, and certain incriminating evidence has been found. Microdots with instructions from someone using the code name Sol, photographs, scale models of the capsule's life-support system with the pipe he was to cut painted in red. And—interestingly enough—a card from this restaurant with a notation on the back—that read: Sol, midnight, 3/21."

Nick glanced up, surprised. In that case, what in hell were they doing here, dining so placidly, talking so openly? He had assumed they were in a "safe house" or, at the very least, in a carefully "neutralized" zone.

Hawk watched him impassively. "The Bali Hai's cards are not given out lightly," he said. "You have to ask for one, and if you're someone of little importance, chances are you won't get it. So how did a \$15,000-a-year space technician end up with one?"

Nick looked past him, seeing the restaurant through new eyes. Alert, professional eyes that missed nothing, hawk probed for the elusive element in the pattern round him, something disturbing, not quite within reach. He had noticed it earlier but thinking they were in a safe house, he had dismissed it from his mind.

Hawk signaled the waiter. "Have the maitre d' step over here a minute, please," he said. He took a photograph from his pocket and showed it to Nick. "This is our friend Pat Hammer," he said. Don Lee appeared and Hawk handed the photo to him. "Recognize this man?" he asked.

Lee studied it a moment. "Sure, Mr. Byrd., I remember him. He was in here about a month ago. With a gorgeous Chinese chick." He winked broadly. "That's how I remember him."

"I take it he got in with no difficulty. Is that because he had a card?"

"No. Because of the girl," said Lee. "Joy Sun. She's been here before. She's an old friend, as a matter of fact. She's some kind of scientist up at Cape Kennedy."

"Thanks, Lee. I won't detain you."

Nick stared at Hawk in amazement. The controlling hand of AXE, troubleshooting arm of the American security forces—a man responsible only to the National Security Council, the Secretary of Defense and the President of the United States—had just conducted that interrogation with all the subtlety of a third-rate divorce

detective!

Had Hawk turned into a security risk? Nick's mind suddenly tensed with alarm—was the man opposite him actually Hawk? When the waiter brought them their coffee, Nick said casually, "Could we have more light here?" The waiter nodded, pressing a hidden button on the wall. Soft light fell across them. Nick glanced at his superior. "They ought to give out miners' lamps when you come in," he smiled.

The leathery old man chuckled. A match flickered, casting a brief glow across his face. It was Hawk, all right. The pungent smoke from the malodorous cigar settled that with finality. "Dr. Sun is already a prime suspect," Hawk said, blowing out the match. "You'll be filled in on her background by the CIA investigator with whom you'll be working ..."

Nick wasn't listening. A tiny glow had gone out with the match. A glow that hadn't been there earlier. He glanced down, to his left. It was faintly visible now that they had extra light—a spider-thin wire running along the edge of the banquette. Nick's eye quickly followed it, searching for the obvious outlet. The wrought-iron pineapple. He tugged at it. It wouldn't give. It was bolted to the center of the table. He dipped his right index finger into the bottom half, felt the cold metal grating under the fake candle wax. A remote pickup mike.

He scribbled two words—We're bugged—on the inside cover of his matches and pushed them across the table. Hawk read the message and nodded blandly. "Now the thing is," he said, "we absolutely have to get one of our people into the moon program. So far we've been unsuccessful. But I have an idea . .

Nick stared at him. He was still staring in disbelief ten minutes later when Hawk glanced at his watch and said, "Well, that about covers it. I've got to be going. Why don't you stay awhile and enjoy yourself? You're going to be pretty busy for the next few days." He stood up and nodded in the direction of the discotheque. "Tilings are beginning to warm up in there. Looks rather interesting —if I were a younger man, of course."

Nick felt something slide under his fingertips. It was a card. He glanced up. Hawk had turned away and was moving toward the entrance, waving goodbye to Don Lee. "More coffee, sir?" asked the waiter.

"No, I think I'll have a drink at the bar." Nick lifted the edge of his hand slightly as the waiter retreated. The message was in Hawk's handwriting. CIA operative yvill contact you here, it read. Recognphrase: "What are you doing here in May? The season's over." Reply: "Social, maybe. Not hunting." Counter-reply: "Mind if I join you —for the hunting, that is?" Beneath this, Hawk had written: Card water-soluble. Make contact with Wash. h.q. no later than midnight

tonight,

Nick slipped the card into his water glass, watched it dissolve, then got up and sauntered into the bar area. He ordered a double scotch. Through the glass partition he could see the cream of Palm Beach's youth writhing spasmodically to the distant roar of drums, electric bass and guitar.

Suddenly the music grew louder. A girl had just come through the glass door from the discotheque. She was a blonde—pretty, fresh-looking, slightly out of breath from dancing. She had that special look about her that spelled money and breeding. She wore olive-green Mphuggers, a midriff blouse and sandals, and she had a glass in her hand.

"I just know you're going to forget Daddy's orders and slip some real rum into my cola this time," she said to the bartender. Then she noticed Nick at the end of the bar and did an elaborate double-take. "Why, hello there!" she smiled brightly. "I didn't recognize you at first. What are you doing here in May? The season's practically over..."

CHAPTER 3

HER NAME WAS Candace Weatherall Sweet—Candy for short—and she completed the recognition exchange with breezy self-confidence.

Now they sat facing each other across a table the size of a top hat in the bar area. “Daddy wouldn’t be a certain General Sweet, would he?” Nick asked grimly. “Member of the Belle Glade Club, who likes his martinis extra dry?”

She laughed. “A perfect description.” She had a beautiful face, with wide-apart, deep-blue eyes under lashes paled by the sun. “They call him General, but he’s really retired,” she added. “He’s a high muckamuck in the CIA now. He was in the OSS during the war, didn’t know what to do with himself afterwards. The Sweets don’t go into business, of course—just government or public service.”

“Of course.” Nick was seething inside. He’d been saddled with an amateur, a debutante looking for excitement on her summer vacation. Not just any debutante, either—but Candy Sweet, who’d made headlines two summers earlier when a party she’d thrown at her parents’ East Hampton home had degenerated into an orgy of drugs, sex and vandalism.

“How old are you, anyway?” he asked.

“Almost twenty.”

“And you’re still not allowed to, drink?”

She flashed him a quick smile. “Us Sweets are kind of allergic to the stuff.”

Nick looked at her glass. It was empty, and he’d seen the bartender pour her a substantial slug. “I get the picture,” he said, and added abruptly, “shall we go?”

He didn’t know where, but he wanted out. Out of the Bali Hai, out of the whole case. It stank. It was dangerous. It had no shape. Nothing you could grab it by. And here he was in the middle of it without even a decent cover—and with a flighty, cotton-headed young deb in tow.

Outside, on the sidewalk, she said, “Let’s walk.” Nick told the parking attendant to hold off on the car and they started down Worth. “The beach is lovely at dusk,” she said enthusiastically.

As soon as they were past the Colony Hotel’s mustard yellow awning, they both spoke at once—“The place was bugged.” She laughed and said, “Do you want to see the setup?” Her eyes were shining with excitement. She looked like a kid who’d just stumbled on a secret passageway. He nodded, wondering what he was in for now.

She turned down a cute yellow-brick alleyway lined with even

cuter antique shops, then made another quick right into a patio hung with plastic grapes and bananas, picking her way through a shadowy maze of upended tables to a grillwork gate. Quietly she swung it open and pointed to a man standing in front of a short length of cyclone fence. He was facing the other way, studying his nails. "The rear of the Bali Hai's parking lot," she whispered. "He's on duty until morning."

Without a word of warning she was off, her sandaled feet making no sound as she moved swiftly across the open stretch of palazzo tiles. It was too late to stop her. All Nick could do was follow. She moved in toward the fence, edging along it, her back flat against it. When she was six feet away the man suddenly turned, looked up.

She moved with blurred, catlike speed, one foot hooking behind his ankle, the other driving for his knee. He went down flat on his back as if snatched backwards by a coiled spring. As the breath exploded from his lungs her sandaled foot swung with controlled force to the side of his head.

Nick watched with awe A perfect coup de savate. He kneeled beside the man, felt his pulse. Irregular but strong. He'd live, but he would be out for at least half an hour.

Candy had already dodged through the fence-gate and was halfway across the parking lot. Nick followed her. She stopped in front of a metal-surfaced access door at the rear of the Bali Hai, reached into the back pocket of her hip-huggers and pulled out a plastic credit card. Gripping the door handle, she pushed it hard toward the hinges and slid the card in until it caught the curve of the spring-loaded lock. It clicked back with a sharp metallic snap. She opened the door and stepped in, grinning mischievously over her shoulder as she said, "Daddy's money will get you in anywhere."

They were in the back hallway of the discotheque. Nick could hear the distant thunder of amplified drums and guitars. They tiptoed past an open doorway. He glanced in, saw a gleaming kitchen with a couple of un-dershirted Chinese sweating at the clipper. The next door they came to was marked "Little Boys." Farther back was a door marked "Little Girls." She pushed this one open and stepped in. Nick hesitated. "Come on!" she hissed. "Don't be an exhaust. It's empty."

There was a utility door just inside. Out came the credit card. The door clicked open. They entered and he closed the door behind them, letting the lock fall quietly in place. They moved along a narrow passageway. There was only one light and that was over the door behind them, so they were a beautiful target. The passageway made a sharp left, then another. "We're behind the banquettes now," she whispered. "In the restaurant section."

The passageway ended abruptly in front of a reinforced Steel door.

She paused, listening. Out came the credit card once again. This time it took a little longer—about a minute. But the door finally sprang, open.

There were two rooms. The first was small, cramped, with gray walls. A desk was shoved against one wall, a row of filing cabinets against another, and there was a water cooler in the corner, leaving a small circle of black linoleum floorspace free in the center.

A steady, monotonous hum came from the room beyond. The door was open. Nick sidled cautiously around it. His jaws clenched at what he saw. It was a long, narrow room and one entire wall was a two-way mirror. Through it he saw the interior of the Bali Hai restaurant — only with an interesting difference. It was clearly lit. The people sitting along the banquettes and at their individual tables were as sharply defined as if they were sitting under the neon lighting of a hamburger stand. “Infrared coating on the glass,” she whispered.

From a dozen-odd slots above the mirror, 16mm. film was inching down in separate strips into bins. The clockwork mechanism of the hidden cameras whirled softly and spools on a dozen different tape recorders were also turning, recording conversations. Nick moved along the room to the banquette where he and Hawk had sat. The camera and tape recorder were switched off, the receiving reels already filled with the complete record of their conversation. On the other side of the mirror, their waiter was clearing away the dishes. Nick threw a switch. The clatter filled the room. Quickly he turned it off.

“I stumbled on this yesterday afternoon,” Candy whispered. “I was in the john when suddenly this man stepped out of the wall! Well, I never ... I simply had to find out what was going on.”

They returned to the front room and Nick began trying the desk and file drawers. They were all locked. One central lock, he saw, served them all. It resisted his Lockpicker’s Special for almost a minute. Then it gave. He opened the drawers one after the other, quickly and quietly sifting through their contents.

“You know what I think’s going on here?” Candy whispered. “There’ve been all kinds of robberies in Palm Beach during the last year. The thieves seem to always know exactly what they want, and when people will be away. I think our friend Don Lee has underworld connections and that he sells the information he gathers here to them.”

“He sells to more than the underworld,” said Nick. He was picking his way through a file drawer filled with 35mm. film, developers, photographic papers, equipment for making microdots and bundles of newspapers from Hong Kong. “Have you told anyone about this?”

“Only Daddy.”

Nick nodded—and Daddy told Hawk and Hawk arranged to meet his top operative here and to talk clearly into the mike. He wanted the two of them on display apparently—and their plans, too. A sudden image of Hawk spilling his martini and picking the olive apart flashed across Nick's mind. He, too, had been searching for the outlet. That settled at least one thing Nick had been wondering about—whether or not to destroy the film and tape of their conversation. Obviously not. Hawk wanted them to have it.

"What's this?" He'd found a snapshot lying face down on the bottom of the drawer containing the microdot equipment. It showed a man and a woman on a leather, office-style couch. Both were naked and in the final convulsions of the sexual act. The man's head had been cropped out of the picture but the girl's face was clearly visible. She was Chinese, and beautiful, and her eyes were glazed over with a kind of petrified lewdness that Nick found strangely stirring even in picture form.

"It's her!" gasped Candy. "That's Joy Sun." She stared over his shoulder at the picture, fascinated, unable to tear her eyes away. "So that's how they got her to cooperate with them—blackmail!"

Nick quickly slipped the snapshot into his back pocket. A sudden draft told him that a door had opened somewhere along the passageway. "Is there another way out?" She shook her head, listening to the sound of approaching footsteps.

N3 started moving into position behind the door. She beat him to it, though. "It's better if he sees someone," she hissed. "Keep your back to him." He nodded. The name of the game was don't go by first impressions. This girl might look like Vassar '68, but she had the brain and sinews of a cat. A dangerous cat.

The footsteps paused in front of the door. A key turned in the lock. The door started to open. There was a sharp intake of breath behind him. From the corner of his eye, Nick saw Candy take one long pace and twist to bring her leg swinging in an arc. Her sandaled foot caught the man full in the groin. Nick swung around. It was their waiter. For an instant the man's unconscious body was rigid with paralysis, then it melted slowly to the ground. "Come on," whispered Candy. "Let's not pause for station identification . .

Fort Pierce, Vero Beach, Wabasso—the lights rose in the distance and swooped by and fell away behind them with monotonous regularity. Nick kept his foot stamped well into the Lamborghini's floorboard, his thoughts slowly taking shape.

The man in the pornographic snapshot. The edge of his neck was visible. It was badly scarred. A deep indentation, caused either by a cut or a rope burn. He also had a dragon tattoo on his right bicep.

Both should be easy enough to trace. He glanced at the girl sitting beside him. "Any chance that the guy in the photo could be Pat Hammer?"

He was surprised by her reaction. She actually blushed. "I'd have to see his face," she said stiffly.

Strange girl. Able to kick a man in the crotch one second and blush the next. And on the job—an even stranger mixture of professionalism and amateurishness. At lockpicking and judo she was an expert. But there was a lighthearted carelessness in her approach to the whole business that could be dangerous—to both of them. The way she'd moved along that passageway with the light behind her—that was asking for it. And when they'd returned to the front of the Bali Hai to pick up the car, she had insisted on mussing her hair and clothing so that it would look like they'd been on the beach in the moonlight. That was overplaying it and therefore equally dangerous.

"What do you expect to find in Hammer's bungalow?" he asked her. "NASA Security and the FBI have been over it with a fine-tooth comb."

"I know, but I thought you should have a look at the place for yourself," she said. "Particularly at some of the microdots they found."

Time to establish who's boss, thought N3. But when he asked what instructions she'd been given, she replied, "To cooperate with you fully. You're top banana."

A few minutes later, as they sped across the Indian River Bridge outside Melbourne, she added, "You're some kind of very special agent, aren't you? Daddy said your recommendation could make or break anyone assigned to work with you, and , . ." She broke off abruptly.

He glanced across at her. "And what?" But the way she was looking at him was answer enough. It was known throughout the combined security forces that when the man known to his colleagues as Killmaster was sent on a job it meant only one thing—that those who had sent him were convinced that death was the most likely solution to the problem at hand.

"Just how seriously do you take all this?" he asked her brusquely. He hadn't liked that look. N3 had been in the game a long time. He had a nose for the smell of fear. "I mean, is this just another summer lark for you? Like that weekend at East Hampton? Because ..."

She swung toward him, blue eyes flashing angrily. "I happen to be a top reporter for a woman's magazine, and I've been on assignment at Cape Kennedy for the last month doing a profile called 'Dr. Sun and the Moon.'" She paused. "I'll admit that I got NASA clearance faster than most reporters because of Daddy's job in the CIA, but that's the only pull I've had. And if you wonder why they chose me for an agent,

look at all the advantages. I was already on the spot, trailing Dr. Sun everywhere with a tape recorder, going through her papers. It was an ideal cover for some real snooping. It would take weeks of red tape to get a real CIA agent as close to her as I am. And there's no time for that. So I was drafted."

"All the judo and the lockpicking," smiled Nick. "Did Daddy teach you all that?"

She laughed and was suddenly an impish little girl once again. "No. My boyfriend did. He's a professional killer."

They took A1A through Canova Beach and past the missile display at Patrick Air Force Base, arriving at Cocoa Beach at ten.

Long-bladed palms with fraying bases lined the quiet, residential streets. Candy directed him to the Hammer bungalow which was on a street fronting the Banana River near the Merritt Island Causeway.

They drove past it but didn't stop. "Crawling with cops," muttered Nick. He'd seen them sitting in unmarked cars on alternate sides of each block. "Green uniforms. What are they—NASA? Connelly Aviation?"

"GKI," she said. "Everyone in Cocoa Beach was pretty nervous and there weren't enough local police to go around"

"General Kinetics?" said Nick. "Are they in on the Apollo program?"

"They make a component in the life support system," she replied. "They have a factory in West Palm Beach, another in Texas City. They do a lot of weapon and missile work for the government, so they have their own security force. Alex Simian loaned them out to the Kennedy Space Center. Makes for good public relations, I guess."

A black sedan with a red blinker on the roof overtook them and one of the uniformed men inside raked them with a long, hard glance. "I think we'd better make tracks," said Nick. The sedan slotted in between them and a car ahead; then it pulled out and they lost it.

"Take the Causeway over to Merritt," she said. "There's another way to reach the bungalow."

It was from a boathouse at Georgiana on Route 3. There was a flat-bottom scow there that she had apparently used before. Nick poled it across a narrow neck of the waterway, steering to shore between a five-foot seawall and a row of wooden pilings. After tying up, they climbed the wall and crossed an open stretch of moonlit backyard. The Hammer bungalow was dark, silent. Light from the-neighboring house lit up its right side.

They came up against the shadowed wall on the left and flattened there, waiting. A car with a dome light drove slowly past out in front. Nick stood like a shadow among the other shadows, listening, absorbing. When it was clear he drifted to the screened kitchen,

doorway, tried the knob, slipped his Lockpicker's Special out and eased the single-action bolt open.

The raw stink of gas still clung to the interior. His pencil flashlight probed the kitchen. The girl pointed to a door. "Hurricane shelter," she whispered. Her finger moved past it to a hallway. "Front room, where it happened."

They checked that first. Nothing had been touched. The sofa and floor were still caked with dried blood. The two bedrooms were next. Then down the switchback stairs to the narrow, whitewashed workshop. The thin, strong beam of the flashlight licked around the room, illuminating neat stacks of labeled, open-lidded cartons. Candy checked one. "The stuff's gone," she whispered.

"Naturally," said Nick dryly. "The FBI wanted it. They run tests, you know."

"But it was here yesterday. Wait a minute!" she snapped her fingers. "I hid a sample in a drawer in the kitchen. I'll bet they missed it." She led the way upstairs.

It wasn't a microdot, just a folded sheet of paper, transparent and stinking of gasoline. Nick unfolded it. It was a rough sketch of the Apollo's life support system. The ink lines were slightly blurred, and there were some terse technical instructions under it, code-signed Sol. "Sol," she whispered. "Latin for the sun. Dr. Sun ..."

The silence in the bungalow was suddenly thick with tension. Nick started to fold the paper and put it away. An angry voice spoke from the doorway: "Hold it like that."

CHAPTER 4

THE MAN STOOD in the kitchen doorway, enormous, a looming silhouette against the moonlight behind him. He had a gun in his hand—a little Smith & Wesson Terrier with a two-inch barrel. He was outside the screen door, pointing the gun through it.

Killmaster's eyes narrowed, watching him. For a moment a shark swirled in their gray depths, then it vanished and he smiled. This man was no threat. He was making too many mistakes to be a professional. Nick raised his hands above his head and ambled slowly toward the door. "What's up, Doc?" he asked amiably.

As he did, his foot suddenly flashed out, slamming into the rear edge of the screen door just below the handle. He hit it with all the weight he had and the man stumbled backwards with a howl of pain, dropping the gun.

Nick surged after him, scooping it up. He jerked the man into the house by his shirt collar before he could sound an alarm and kicked the door shut behind him. "Who are you?" he rasped. The pencil flashlight flicked on, stabbing into the man's face.

He was big—at least six-four—and beefy, with gray hair cropped short to the shape of his bullet head and with a sunburned face dusted over with pale freckles.

"Next door neighbor," said Candy. "Name's Dexter. I checked on him when I was here last night."

"Yeah, and I spotted you prowlin' around here last night, too," growled Dexter, nursing his wrist. "That's why I was on the lookout tonight."

"What's your first name?" asked Nick.

"Hank."

"Well listen, Hank. You've stumbled into a little official business." Nick flashed the official-looking badge that was part of every AXEmen's disguise kit. "We're government investigators, so let's stay calm, keep our voices down and discuss the Hammer case."

Dexter narrowed his eyes. "If you're government, how come you're pussy-footing around here in the dark?"

"We're with a top-secret branch of the National Security Agency. That's all I can tell you. Not even the FBI knows about us."

Dexter was visibly impressed. "Yeah? No kiddin'? I work for NASA myself. I'm with Connelly Aviation."

"You knew Hammer?"

"As a neighbor, sure. But not on the job. I work in the Electronic Guidance Division over at the Cape. I'll tell you something, though.

Hammer never killed his family or himself. It was murder—to shut him up.”

“How do you know this?”

“I saw the guys who did it.” He glanced over his shoulder nervously, then said, “No kidding. I mean it. I was watching the TV report on the fire that night. They’d just flashed Pat’s picture on it. A few minutes later I heard this scream, kind of muffled-like. I went over to the window. There was this car, no marks on it but with a whip aerial, parked out in front of their bungalow. A minute later these three guys in cops’ uniforms came runnin’ out. They looked kind of like state troopers, only one of ‘em was Chinese an’ I figured right away that wasn’t kosher. There’s no Chinese on the force. Another one was totin’ a gasoline can an’ he had these stains all over his uniform. ‘Later I figured they were blood. They got in the car an’ pulled away fast. A few minutes later the real cops came.”

Candy said, “Have you told anyone this?”

“Are you kiddin’? The FBI, the cops, the NASA people—everybody. Listen, we’re all nervous as hell around here.” He paused, “Hammer wasn’t acting like himself for the last couple of weeks. We all knew there was something wrong, that something was bugging him. The way I figure it, somebody told him he had to play ball with them or his wife and kids would get it.”

A car passed by on the street outside and he immediately froze. It hardly showed. Just a flicker of the eyes, but even in the poor light Nick caught it. “It could happen to any of us,” Dexter said hoarsely. “We don’t have any protection—nothing like what the missile workers have. So believe you me, I’m plenty glad General Kinetics lent us their cops. Before that, my wife was afraid to even take the kids to school or go shopping. All the women here were. But GKI arranged special bus service and now they do it in one trip—drop the kids off at school first, then go on to the Orlando shopping center. It’s a lot safer that way. And I don’t mind leavin’ ‘em to go to work.” He chuckled grimly. “Just the same, Mister—can I have my gun back? Just in case.”

Nick swung the Lamborghini out of the empty lot across from the Georgiana boatyard. “Where are you staying?” he asked her.

The mission had been accomplished. The evidence, still reeking of gasoline, lay folded in his back pocket next to the pornographic snapshot. The trip back across the waterway had been uneventful. “At the Polaris,” she said. “It’s on the beach, just north of A1A, on the road to Port Canaveral.”

“Right.” He tramped on the gas and the powerful silver bullet surged ahead. The wind whipped their faces. “How do you get around?” he asked her.

“I left my Giulia in Palm Beach,” she replied. “Daddy’s chauffeur

will drive it up in the morning.”

Of course, he thought. It figured. An Alfa-Romeo. Suddenly she moved closer and he felt her hand on his arm. “Are we off-duty now?”

He glanced at her, eyes glinting with amusement. “Unless you have a better idea.”

She shook her head. “I don’t.” He felt her hand tighten on his arm. “What about you?”

He sneaked a look at his watch. Eleven-fifteen. “I’ve got to get settled somewhere,” he said.

He could feel her fingernails through his shirt now. “The Polaris,” she murmured. “TV in every room, heated pool, pets, cafe, dining room, bar and coin laundry.”

“Is that a good idea?” he chuckled.

“That’s your decision.” He could feel the jutting hardness of her breasts against his sleeve. He glanced at her in the mirror. The wind had plastered her long, burnished blonde hair against the side of her face. She moved the hair aside with the fingers of her right hand and Nick had a good view of her profile—the high brow, deep-blue eyes, the wide sensuous mouth bearing the faint traces of a smile. The little girl was now a highly desirable woman, he thought. But duty called. He had to contact AXE headquarters before midnight.

“The first rule of espionage,” he recited. “Avoid being seen in the company of a fellow operative.”

He felt her stiffen, draw away. “Meaning?”

They had just passed the Gemini Inn on North Atlantic Avenue. “That I’ll be staying there,” he said. He stopped for a traffic light and glanced over at her. Its red glow turned her skin to flame.

She didn’t speak to him again on the way to the Polaris, and when she got out, her face was closed to him, angry. She slammed the door and disappeared into the lobby without looking back. She wasn’t used to being turned down. The rich never are.

Hawk’s voice cut into his ear like a knife. “Flight 1401-A leaves Miami International for Houston at 3:00 A.M. EST. Poindexter of Editing will meet you in front of the airline ticket counter at 2:30 A.M. He’ll have all the necessary information with him, including a study folder on your background and present duties.”

Nick was on Route 1 again, heading south through an anonymous world of rushing lights and darkness. Hawk’s voice began to fade and he leaned forward, adjusting the knob on the tiny, ultra-sensitive two-way radio concealed among the dazzling array of dials on the dashboard.

When the head of AXE paused, he said, “If you’ll excuse the expression, sir, I don’t know beans about outer space. How can I hope

to masquerade as an astronaut?"

"We'll come back to that in a moment, N3." Hawk's voice was so sharp that Nick winced and adjusted the volume control of his earplug. Any similarity between the rambling, glassy-eyed drunk of that afternoon and the man who now sat speaking to him from his desk at AXE's Washington headquarters was strictly the result of Hawk's acting ability and of a stomach as tough and leathery as his hide.

"Now regarding the situation at the Bali Hai," Hawk continued, "let me explain. There has been high-level leakage of information for months. We think we've narrowed it down to this restaurant. Senators, generals, top government contractors dine there. There's careless talk. The microphones pick it up. But where it goes, we don't know. So this afternoon I deliberately gave out false information." He allowed himself a brief, humorless chuckle. "Rather like tracing a leak by dumping yellow dye into the plumbing system. I want to see where that yellow dye comes out AXE has sensitive listening posts at all levels in every government and espionage organization in the world. They'll pick it up and presto—we'll have the connecting pipeline."

Through the curved wind screen Nick watched a reddish glow of lights growing rapidly larger.. "So everything I was told in the Bali Hai was false," he said, slowing for the Vero Beach Interchange.. He thought fleetingly of the suitcases containing his personal things. They were sitting in a room he'd never even entered at the Gemini Inn in Cocoa Beach. No sooner had he registered than he'd had to rush back to his car to contact AXE. No sooner had he contacted AXE than he was on his way back to Miami. Had the trip north really been necessary? Couldn't Hawk have brought his own stooge along to Palm Beach?

"Not everything, N3. That's just the point. Only a few items were false—but vital ones. I suggested that the U.S. moon program was a shambles. I further suggested that it would be a couple of years before it would get under way again. The truth, however, is—and this is known only to me, a few top officials of NASA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the President, and now you, Nicholas—the truth is that NASA is going to attempt another manned flight within the next few days. Not even the astronauts themselves know about it. It's to be called Phoenix One—because it will arise from the ashes of the Apollo project. Fortunately Connelly Aviation has the equipment ready. They're rushing a second capsule to Cape Kennedy from their California plant. The second team of astronauts are at the peak of their training, ready to go. It's felt that this is the psychological moment for another shot." The voice paused. "This one, of course, must go off without a hitch. It's felt that a smashing success at this moment is the only thing that

will remove the bitter taste of the Apollo disaster from the public's mouth. And that taste must be removed if the U.S. space program is to be saved."

"And where," Nick asked, "does Astronaut N3 enter the picture?"

"There's a man lying in a coma in Walter Reed Hospital at this moment," said Hawk harshly. He spoke into the microphone on his desk in Washington and his voice was scrambled into meaningless vibrations along the airwaves that were translated into normal human sounds by a complex series of microscopic relays in the car radio. They arrived in Nick's ear as Hawk's voice—and with no loss of harshness along the way. "He's been there for three days. The doctors aren't sure they can save him, or if they can, whether his mind will ever be the same again. He was the captain of the second reserve team—Colonel Glenn Eglund. Someone tried to murder him at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston where he and his teammates were training for the project."

Hawk sketched in the details as Nick sent the silver 350 GT hurtling through the night. Colonel Eglund had been in the sealed prototype of the Apollo capsule, testing the life support system. Someone had apparently adjusted the controls from outside, stepping up the nitrogen content. This had mixed with the astronaut's own perspiration inside his space suit to form deadly, intoxicating Amine gas.

"Eglund had obviously seen something," said Hawk, "or in some way knew too much. What, we don't know. He was unconscious when found, and has never regained consciousness. But we hope to find out. That's why you're to take his place, N3. Eglund is approximately your age, your size, has your general physique. Poindexter's skill with makeup will take care of the rest."

"What about the girl?" Nick asked. "Candy Sweet."

"Let her stay where she is for the moment. By the way, N3, what's your impression of her?"

"She can be very professional at times, a damned fool at others."

"Yes—like her father," replied Hawk, and Nick could feel the ice in his tone. "I never approved of the society element in the upper echelons of the CIA, but that was before I had any say about it. Dickinson Sweet should have had more sense than to let his daughter get mixed up in a thing like this. That's another reason I flew down to Palm Beach personally—I wanted to have a chat with the girl before she contacted you." He paused. "That foray into the back of the Bali Hai that you mentioned earlier—in my opinion it was pointless and risky. Do you think you can keep her from upsetting any more apple carts?"

Nick said he could, adding, "One good thing came out of it,

though. An interesting snapshot of Dr. Sun. There's also a man in it. I'll have Poindexter send it on for identification."

"Hmm." Hank's voice was non-committal. "Dr. Sun is in Houston now with the other astronauts. She doesn't know, of course, that you're subbing for Eglund. The only person outside AXE who does know is General Hewlett McAlester, the overall chief of NASA Security. He helped arrange the masquerade."

"I still have my doubts about bringing it off," said Nick. "After all, the astronauts in the team have been training together for months. They know each other intimately."

"Fortunately we have the Amine poisoning working for us," Hawk's voice rasped in his ear. "One of the chief symptoms is a weakening of the memory function. So if you don't remember all your colleagues and duties, it will seem quite natural." He paused. "Besides, I doubt that you'll have to keep the charade up for more than a day. Whoever made that first attempt on Eglund's life will try again. And he or she—won't waste much time about it"

CHAPTER 5

SHE WAS EVEN more beautiful than the pornographic photo had suggested. Beautiful in a chiseled, almost inhuman way which Nick found unnerving. Her hair was black—black as an arctic midnight—matching her eyes even to the glints and highlights that shone there. Her mouth was full, luscious, accented by the inherited cheekbones of her forebears—those on her father's side, at least. Nick remembered the dossier he'd studied on the flight to Houston. Her mother was English.

She hadn't seen him yet. She was walking along the neutral-smelling white corridor of the Manned Spacecraft Center, talking with a colleague.

Her body was good. The crisp white smock she wore over her street clothes couldn't hide that. She was a shapely, full-breasted woman who walked with a deliberate stance that thrust her beauty forward provocatively, each lithe step outlining the youthful swelling of her thighs.

Quickly N3 reviewed the salient facts: Joy Han Sun, M.D., Ph.D.; born in Shanghai during Japanese occupation; British mother, Chinese businessman father; educated at Mansfield College in Kowloon, then at M.I.T. in Massachusetts; became U.S. citizen; a specialist in aerospace medicine; worked first for General Kinetics (at GKI's Miami Medical Institute), then for the U.S. Air Force at Brooks Field, San Antonio; finally for NASA itself, dividing her time between the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston and Cape Kennedy.

"Dr. Sun, may we see you a moment?"

It was the tall, anvil-shouldered man at Nick's side who spoke. Major Duane F. Sollitz, Security Chief for the Apollo Project. Nick had been handed over to him for re-processing by General McAlester.

She turned toward them, a faint smile still on her lips from the previous conversation. Her gaze brushed past Major Sollitz and came to an abrupt halt at Nick's face —the face on which Poindexter of Editing had labored for almost two hours that morning.

She was good. She didn't scream or run down the hall or do anything silly. And the widening of her eyes was barely perceptible, but to Nick's trained eye the effect was no less dramatic than if she had. "I didn't expect you back this soon, Colonel." Her voice was low, its timbre remarkable clear. The accent was British. They shook hands, European style. "How do you feel?"

"Still a bit disoriented." He spoke with a pronounced Kansas twang —the result of sitting three hours with a tape-recording of Eglund's

voice plugged into his ear.

“That’s to be expected, Colonel.”

He watched the pulse beating in her slim throat. She didn’t look away from him but the smile was gone and her dark eyes were strangely bright.

Major Sollitz glanced at his watch. “He’s all yours, Dr. Sun,” he said in clipped, precise tones. “I’m running late for the o-nine-hundred meeting. Let me know if any problems crop up.” He turned abruptly on his heel and marched off. There were no waste motions With Sollitz. A ramrod-stiff veteran of the Flying Tigers and a Japanese POW camp in the Philippines, he was almost a caricature of militarism run rampant.

General McAlester had been worried about sneaking Kick past him. “He’s sharp,” he’d said while visiting Nick in Eglund’s Lawndale Road apartment that morning. “Very sharp. So don’t relax around him for even a second. Because if he tumbles to the fact that you’re not Eglund, he’ll push the alarm button and blow your cover higher than the Washington Monument.” But when Nick had reported to the Major’s office, it had gone off like a charm. Sollitz had been so surprised to see him that he’d put him through only the most perfunctory of security checks.

“Follow me, please,” said Dr. Sun.

Nick fell in behind her, automatically noting the smooth, limber movement of her hips, the length of her long, firm legs. The opposition, he decided, was getting better and better looking.

Opposition she was, though. No doubt about it. And maybe a killer, too. He remembered Hawk’s phrase: “He, or she, will try again.” And so far it all pointed to “she.” The person who’d tried to kill Eglund had to be (first,) someone with access to the Medical Research Section and (second,) someone with scientific training, particularly in the chemistry of extra-terrestrial life support. Someone who knew that a certain quantity of extra nitrogen would mix with the ammonia from human sweat to form deadly Amine gas. Dr. Sun, Medical Research Chief of Project Apollo, had the access and the training, and her special field was maintaining human life in outer space.

She opened the door of a small anteroom and stood aside, motioning to Nick. “Take off your clothes, please. I’ll be right with you.”

Nick swung toward her, his nerves suddenly tight. Forcing his tone to remain casual, he said, “Is this absolutely necessary? I mean Walter Reed released me, and a copy of their report is on its way to you.”

The smile was faintly mocking. It started in the eyes, then touched her mouth. “Don’t be shy, Colonel Eglund. It won’t be the first time

I've seen you naked, after all."

That was exactly what Nick was afraid of. He had scars on his body he was sure Eglund never had. Poindexter had done nothing about them, for this was a completely unexpected development. Editing's Documents Section had worked up a phony medical report on Walter Reed stationery. They had figured that would be enough, that NASA Medical would only test his sight, hearing, motor reactions and sense of balance.

Nick got undressed and laid his things across a chair. Pointless to resist. "Eglund" couldn't return to training until he'd received a medical fitness okay from Dr. Sun. He heard a door open and close. High heels clicked toward him. The plastic curtains were drawn aside. "The shorts, too, please," she said. Reluctantly, he slid them off. "Step out here, please."

In the middle of the room was an odd-looking surgical couch made of leather and gleaming aluminum. Nick didn't like the look of it. He felt more than naked. He felt vulnerable. The stiletto he usually carried up his sleeve, the gas bomb that usually nestled in his pocket, the stripped-down Luger he called Wilhelmina, all his Usual "protective devices" were far away—at AXE headquarters in Washington where he'd left them before going on vacation. If the doors suddenly burst open and fifty armed men leaped in, he'd be forced to fight with the only weapon at hand—his body.

It was lethal enough, though. Even in repose, it was streamlined, muscular, dangerous-looking. The hard, tanned flesh was creased with old scars. The muscles were etched against the bones. The hands were big, thick, knotted with veins. They looked made for violence—as befitted a man whose code name was Killmaster.

Dr. Sun's eyes widened perceptibly as he walked across the room toward her. They remained riveted on his midsection—and he was damned sure it wasn't just his physique that she found so fascinating. It was the mementos of a half-dozen knives and bullets. A dead giveaway.

He had to divert her attention. Eglund was a bachelor. His dossier had mentioned that he was a skirt-chaser, something of a wolf in astronaut's clothing. So what could be more natural? A man and an attractive woman alone together in a room, the man naked ...

He didn't stop when he reached her, but suddenly pressed her back against the surgical table, his hands reaching up under her skirt as he kissed her, his mouth hard and brutal against hers. It was a crude performance and it got the hand it deserved—right across his face, momentarily stunning him.

"You animal!" She stood pressed against the table, the back of her hand to her mouth. Her eyes glinted white with outrage, fear, anger

and a dozen other emotions, none of them pleasant. Looking at her now, he had trouble connecting Joy Sun with the frenzied, wanton girl in that pornographic photo.

"I warned you about this once before, Colonel." Her mouth shook. She was on the verge of tears. "I'm not the kind of woman you seem to think I am. I will not tolerate these cheap seductions ..."

The maneuver had the desired effect. All thoughts of a physical exam were forgotten. "Please get dressed," she said icily. "It's obvious that you're completely recovered. You will report to the Training Coordinator, then join your teammates over at the Simulation Building."

The sky behind the range of jagged peaks was midnight black, pinpointed with stars. The terrain between was rolling, crater-pocked, dotted with spiky outcroppings and splinter-sharp fragments of stone. Steep canyons crisscrossed the rubble-strewn mesa like petrified bolts of lightning.

Cautiously Nick climbed down the gold-plated ladder attached to one of the LM's four legs. At the bottom he placed one foot on the edge of the dish-shaped pad and stepped out onto the surface of the moon.

The dust layer underfoot had the consistency of crunchy snow. Slowly he placed one boot in front of the other, then just as slowly repeated the process. Gradually he began to walk. It was tough going. Endless pot holes and sprouts of congealed rock slowed him down. Every step was uncertain, a fall dangerous.

In his ears was a steady, loud hissing sound. It came from the pressurizing, breathing, cooling and drying systems of his rubberized moon suit. He moved his head from side to side inside the close-fitting plastic helmet, looking for the others. The light was blinding. He brought his right-hand thermal mitten up and lowered one of the sun-filtering visors.

The voice in his earphones said, "Welcome back to the Rock Pile, Colonel. We're over here, on the edge of the Ocean of Storms. No, not that way—to your right."

Nick turned and saw the two figures in their bulky moon suits waving to him. He waved back. "Roger, John," he said into his mike. "Good to see you, good to be back. I'm still a bit disoriented. You'll have to bear with me."

He was glad he was meeting them this way. Who could tell anyone's identity through sixty-five pounds of rubber, nylon and plastic?

Earlier in the Lunar Simulation ready room, he'd had a close call. Gordon Nash, captain of the first reserve team of Apollo astronauts,

had stopped by to see him. “Did Lucy get to see you in the hospital?” he’d asked, and Nick, misreading his sly grin, had thought he was referring to one of Eglund’s girlfriends. He’d made a faintly off-color crack and had been surprised to see Nash frown. Too late, he’d remembered the dossier—Lucy was Eglund’s younger sister and Gordon Nash’s current romantic interest. He’d managed to alibi his way out of it (“Just kidding, Gord”), but it had been close. Too close.

One of Nick’s teammates was collecting rocks from the lunar surface and stashing them in a metal collection box while the other one squatted over a seismograph-like device, recording the agitated flutterings of its needle. Nick stood watching them for a few minutes, uncomfortably aware that he didn’t have the slightest idea of what he should be doing. Finally the one working with the seismograph glanced up. “Hadn’t you better check out the LRV?” Hi’s voice crackled in N3’s earphones.

“Right.” Nick’s ten-hour education had included this term—fortunately. LRV stood for Lunar Roving Vehicle. It was a moon car powered by fuel cells that rode on special cylindrical wheels with spiral blades instead of spokes. It was designed to be landed on the moon ahead of the astronauts, so it had to be parked somewhere on this sprawling ten-acre simulation of the moon’s surface that lay at the heart of the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston.

Nick moved out across the barren, forbidding terrain. The pumice-like surface beneath his feet was brittle, sharp, full of hidden holes and jagged outcroppings. Walking on it was torture. “It’s probably still over in the ravine at R-12,” the voice in his ear said. “The first team was working with it there yesterday.”

Where in hell was R-12? Nick wondered. But a moment later he happened to look up and there, along the edge of the great black, star-punctured roof of the Simulation Building, he saw grid-marks running from one to twenty-six and, along the outer edge, from A to Z. Luck was still with him.

It took him close to half an hour to reach the ravine although it was only a few hundred yards from the Lunar Module. The problem was reduced gravity. The scientists who’d constructed the artificial moonscape had reproduced every condition to be found on the real tiling: A temperature range of five hundred degrees, the most intense vacuum yet to be created by man, and feeble gravity—only one-sixth as strong as the earth’s. That made it almost impossible to keep one’s balance. Although Nick could lope along with ease, even go gliding through the air for hundreds of feet if he chose, he didn’t dare move at more than a slow crawl. The terrain was too rugged, too uncertain, and there was no way of coming to a sudden stop.

The ravine was almost fifteen feet deep and steep-sided. It ran in a

tight, zigzag pattern, its bottom gouged and pitted by hundreds of artificial meteorites. There was no sign of the Lunar Vehicle at Grid 12, but that didn't mean much. It could be only a few yards away, hidden from view.

Cautiously Nick edged his way down the steep flank, testing each hand-and foothold before putting his entire weight on it. Tiny meteorite pebbles went bouncing down ahead of him, dislodged by his boots. When he reached the floor of the ravine, he turned left, heading toward Grid 11. He moved slowly, picking his way over the tortured convolutions and spiky outcroppings of a simulated ash flow.

Because of the steady hissing sound in his ears and because of the vacuum outside his suit, he didn't hear anything behind him. But he either saw or sensed a sudden flash of motion and turned.

A shapeless thing with two glaring orange eyes came bearing down on him. It turned into a giant insect, then a weird four-wheeled vehicle and he saw a man in a moon suit similar to his sitting at the controls. Nick waved his arms wildly, then realized that the man had seen him and had purposely put on an extra burst of speed.

There was no escape.

The Lunar Vehicle came hurtling toward him, its huge cylindrical wheels with their razor-sharp spiral blades filling the ravine from wall to wall. . ,

CHAPTER 6

NICK KNEW what would happen if those blades tore his suit.

Outside, the simulated two-week lunar day was only minutes short of high noon. The temperature was 250°F. Higher than the boiling point of water—higher than that of human blood, too. Add to this a vacuum so intense that pieces of metal welded themselves together spontaneously when they came in contact, and you had a phenomenon known to scientists as “ebullition.”

This meant that the interior of the exposed human body would boil. Bubbles would begin to form—first in the mucous lining of the mouth and eyes, then in the tissues of other vital organs. Death would occur within minutes.

He had to keep clear of those flashing, blade-like spokes. But there was no room on either side. Only one thing was possible. Hit the ground, let the monstrous three-ton vehicle roll over him. Its weight in the gravity-free vacuum atmosphere was only half a ton and this, was further modified by the wheels which flattened out at the bottom like soft tires in order to achieve traction.

There was a slight depression a few feet behind him. He swung around and went sprawling into it, face down, fingers clawing at the scoriaceous volcanic rock. His head inside the plastic bubble was the most vulnerable part of him. But it was lined up with the space between the wheels and the ravine was too narrow for any maneuvering by the LRV. His luck was still running.

Silently it came rolling over him, blotting out the light. Intense pressure slammed into his back and legs, crushing him against the rock. The breath exploded from his lungs. His vision momentarily dimmed. Then the first set of wheels had passed over him and he was lying in the rushing darkness beneath the 31-foot-long vehicle, watching the second set come hurtling toward him.

He saw it too late. A low-hanging boxlike piece of equipment. It slammed against his ECM backpack, spinning him over. He felt the pack torn from his shoulders. The hissing in his ears stopped abruptly. Heat seared his lungs. Then the second wheels crushed into him and pain exploded through him like a black cloud.

He held onto a thin thread of consciousness because he knew he was finished if he didn't. Intense fight scorched his eyes. He struggled sluggishly upward through physical torment, searching, for the vehicle. Slowly his eyes stopped swimming and focused on it. It was some fifty yards past him and no longer moving. The man in the moon suit stood atop the control box, looking back at him.

Nick gasped for breath—but there was none. The artery-like tubes inside his suit no longer carried cool oxygen from the main intake duct at his waist. His fingers clawed at the torn rubber on his back where the Environmental Control pack had been. His mouth opened. The lips moved dryly inside the dead plastic bubble. “Help,” he croaked into the mike—but it, too, was dead, the wires of the Communication Power Unit severed along with the others.

The man in the moon suit had climbed down from the lunar vehicle. He pulled a utility knife from under the seat on the control box and started toward him.

That action saved N3’s life.

The knife meant that Nick wasn’t finished, that one last piece of equipment had to be severed—and that was how he remembered the tiny packet attached to his waist. It was there in cases of malfunctions in the backpack system. It contained a five-minute supply of emergency oxygen.

He switched it on. A soft hissing sound filled the plastic bubble. He forced his tortured lungs to breathe in. Coolness filled them. His vision cleared. He gritted his teeth and struggled to his feet. His mind started to explore his body to see what was left of it. Then suddenly there was no time for taking stock. The other man had taken a long running stride. He bounced once to become airborne and came gliding toward him, light as a feather in the reduced gravity atmosphere. The knife was held low, point down, ready for a quick upward flip that would sever the emergency lifeline.

Nick dug his toes into a ridge in the volcanic rock. He dropped his hands in a single sweep to the rear, like a man making a racing dive. Then he catapulted himself forward, throwing all of his stored-up power into the lunge. He found himself soaring through the air with frightening speed—but wide of the mark. The other man ducked his head, jackknifed down. Nick made a grab at his knife-hand as he passed, but missed.

It was like fighting under water. The force field was radically different. Balance, thrust, reaction time—all were changed by the reduction in gravity. Once a motion was started, it was virtually impossible to stop it or to change its direction. He was now gliding to earth at the end of a wide parabola—a good thirty yards away from where his opponent stood.

He swung around just as the other man launched a projectile of some kind. It slammed into his upper thigh, spinning him to the ground. It was a huge, jagged chunk of meteorite, the size of a small boulder. Impossible to even lift under normal gravity conditions. Pain knifed through his leg. He shook his head, started to rise. A thermal mitten suddenly came down, scrabbling at his emergency oxygen kit.

The man was already on him.

He slid across Nick and in passing struck at his airpipe with the edge of the utility knife. It bounced harmlessly off and Nick brought his right leg up, the heel of his heavy metallic boot meeting the man's relatively exposed solar plexus on a rising angle. The shadowy face inside the plastic bubble opened its mouth in a great silent exhalation, its eyes rolling. Nick surged to his feet. But before he could follow up, the man slithered away like an eel and turned toward him, poised to attack once again.

He feinted for N3's throat and aimed a ferocious mae geri at his groin. The blow missed its target by less than an inch, numbing Nick's leg and almost causing him to lose his balance. Before he could counter, the man swung around, following up with a pile-driving rear kick that sent Nick tumbling forward over the jagged outcroppings of the ravine floor. He couldn't stop. He kept rolling, the razor-sharp rocks tearing at his suit.

From the corner of his eye he saw the man unzip a side pocket, pull out a weird-looking gun and take careful aim at him. He grabbed at an outcropping, brought himself to a sudden halt. A streak of dazzling, blue-white magnesium light laced past him, exploding against a rock. A flare gun! The man started to reload it. Nick launched himself at him.

The man dropped the gun and evaded the two-fisted punch aimed at his chest. He brought his left foot up, making a last vicious lunge at Nick's unprotected groin. N3 took the boot in both hands and twisted. The man went down like a felled tree and before he could move, Killmaster was on top of him. The man's knife-hand flashed toward him. Nick chopped with the side of his gloved hand at the exposed wrist. It blunted the forward thrust. His fingers closed around the man's wrist and twisted. The knife wouldn't drop. He twisted harder and felt something snap and the man's arm went limp.

At the same instant the hissing in Nick's ear stopped. The emergency oxygen supply had run out. Searing heat stabbed into his lungs. Yoga-trained muscles automatically took over, protecting them. He could hold his breath for four mintues, but no longer, and physical exertion was impossible.

Something raw and screamingly painful suddenly cut across his arm with a shock that almost made him open his mouth to breathe. The man had shifted the knife to his other hand and cut his arm, forcing his fingers open. Now he flung himself past Nick, cradling his broken wrist in his good hand. He stumbled off along the ravine, a plume of water vapor rising from his backpack.

A dim sense of survival sent Nick crawling toward the flare gun. He didn't have to die. But the voices in his ear said: Too far to go. You

can't make it. His lungs screamed for air. His fingers scrabbled out across the ground, reaching for the gun. Air! his lungs kept shrieking. It was getting worse by the second, darker. Fingers closed around it. No strength, but he pressed the trigger anyway and the explosion of light was so blinding that he had to clap his free hand over his eyes. And that was the last thing he remembered doing ...

"Why didn't you head for the emergency exit?"

Ray Finney, the Project Flight Director, leaned over him anxiously as fellow astronauts Roger Caine and John Corbinet helped strip off his moon suit in the Simulation Building's ready room. Finney held out a small nasal-spray dispenser of oxygen and Nick took another deep swig from it.

"Emergency exit?" he muttered vaguely. "Where?"

The three men glanced at each other. "Less than twenty yards from Grid 12," said Finney. "You've used it before."

That must have been the exit his opponent in the moon suit had been heading for. There were ten of them spotted around the moonscape, he recalled now. Each had an air-lock and pressurization chamber. They were unmanned and opened into a subterranean storage area beneath the Simulation Building. So getting in and out would pose no problem if you knew your way around— and Nick's opponent apparently did.

"Lucky thing John noticed that first signal from the flare gun," Roger Caine was saying to Finney. "We headed for it right away. About six minutes later there was another one. We were less than a minute away by then."

"It pinpointed his position exactly," Corbinet added. "Another few seconds and he would have been a goner. He was already turning blue. We cut him in on Roger's emergency supply and dragged him to the exit. Christ! Take a look at that!" he suddenly exclaimed.

They had removed the pressure suit and were staring at the bloodstained inner garment. Caine poked a finger through the thermal material. "You're lucky you didn't Start boiling up," he said.

Finney bent over the v/ound. "This looks like a knife cut," he said. "What happened? You better start at the beginning."

Nick shook his head. "Look, I feel pretty stupid about this," he said. "I fell on the damned utility knife when I was trying to get out of the ravine. I just lost my balance and ..."

"What about your ECM pack?" demanded the Flight Director. "How did that come off?"

"When I fell. It got caught on an Outcropping."

"There's sure to be an investigation," said Finney gloomily. "NASA Security wants a report on every accident these days."

“Later. He needs some medical attention first,” said Corbinet. He turned to Roger Caine. “Better give Dr. Sun a cafl.”

Nick struggled to a sitting position. “Hell no, I’m fine,” he said. “It’s just a flesh wound. You guys can bind it up yourselves.” Dr. Sun was one person he didn’t want to see. He knew what would happen. She would insist on giving him a pain-killing injection—and that injection would finish the job her confederate had botched up on the moonscape.

“I’ve got a bone to pick with Joy Sun,” snapped Finney. “She should never have passed you in the condition you’re in. Dizzy spells, lapses of memory. You should be at home, flat on your back. What’s the matter with that dame anyway?”

Nick had a pretty good hunch. Once she had seen him naked she knew he wasn’t Colonel Eglund, which meant that he had to be a government plant, which meant in turn that he’d been brought in to trap her. So what better place to send him than the moonscape? There her confederate—or was it plural?—could arrange still another convenient “accident.”

Finney picked up the phone and ordered some first aid supplies. When he hung up, he turned to Nick and said, “I’m going to have your car brought around front. Caine, you drive him home. And Eglund, you stay there until I can get a doctor over to check you out.”

Nick shrugged inwardly. It didn’t matter where he waited. The next move was hers. Because one thing was sure. She couldn’t rest until he was out of the picture. Permanently.

Poindexter had turned the storm cellar of Eglund’s bachelor bungalow into a full-scale AXE field office.

There was a miniature darkroom equipped with 35mm. cameras, film, developers and microdot equipment, a metal filing cabinet filled with Lastotex masks, flexible saw blades in shoelaces, compasses in buttons, fountain pens that shot needles, watches containing tiny transistor transmitters and an elaborate communications setup featuring a solid-state picture-phone that could link them with headquarters at a moment’s notice.

“Look as if you’ve been busy,” said Nick.

“I’ve got an ID on the man in the photo,” Poindexter replied with carefully suppressed enthusiasm. He was a straw-haired, choirboy-faced New Englander who looked as though he’d be more at home organizing a church picnic than working with sophisticated devices of death and destruction.

He unpinned a damp 8 x 10 from the dryer and handed it to Nick. It was a front-view, head-and-shoulders shot of a dark, wolf-faced man with dead gray eyes. A deep scar encircled his neck just beneath the third vertebra. “Name’s Rinaldo Tribolati,” said Poindexter, “but he

calls himself Reno Tree for short. The print's a bit fuzzy because I took it directly off the picture-phone. It's a photo of a photo of a photo."

"How come so fast?"

"It wasn't the tattoo. That type of dragon is pretty common. Thousands of GI's who served in the Far East —particularly in the Philippines during World War II— have them. It was the scar around the neck that tipped off the ID boys. They made a blowup and studied it. Caused by rope burn. And that was all they had to know. Seems this Reno Tree was once a hit man for the Las Vegas mobs. One of his intended victims almost got him, though. Garrotted him half to death. He still carries the scar."

"I've heard the name Reno Tree," said Nick, "but not as a hit man. As a kind of dancing master to the Jet Set."

"That's our boy," replied Poindexter. "He's legit now. The society girls seem to love him. Pic Magazine called him the Pied Piper of Palm Beach. He runs the discotheque in the Bali Hai."

Nick looked at the front-view photo, then at the copy of the pornographic snapshot that Poindexter had handed him. The ecstatic expression on Joy Sun's face still haunted him. "Hardly what you'd call handsome," he said. "Wonder what the girls see in him."

"Maybe they like the way he slaps them around."

"He's that type, is he?" Nick folded the photos and slipped them into his wallet. "Better raise headquarters," he added. "I've got to check in."

Poindexter walked over to the picture-phone and flicked a switch. "He was licensed by the mob to operate as a Shylock and extortionist," he said, watching the screen shimmer to life. "In return he killed and did Strong-arm work for them. He was known as the last resort. When all other Shylocks turned a man down, Reno Tree would take him on. He loved it when they defaulted. It gave him a reason to work them over. But most of all he loved to torture women. There's a story around that he had a stable of girls in Vegas and that he slashed all their faces with a razor when he left town ... A-4, N3 on the scrambler from H.T. station," he said as a lovely brunette wearing a communications headset shimmered into view.

"Hold, please." She was replaced by the iron-gray-haired old man to whom Nick gave all his allegiance and most of his affection. N3 made his report, noting as he did that the familiar cigar was missing and also the usual glint of humor in the ice-chip eyes. Hawk was upset, preoccupied. And he lost no time in getting to what was troubling him.

"The AXE listening posts have reported in," he said brusquely at the conclusion of Nick's report. "And the news isn't good. That false information I spread at the Bali Hai has turned up—but domestically,

at a relatively low underworld level. Bets are being placed in Las Vegas on the NASA moon program. The smart money is saying it will be two years before the project gets under way again." He paused. "What has me really concerned, however, is that the top secret information I gave you on Phoenix One has also appeared—and at a very high level in Washington."

Hawk's craggy features grew even grimmer. "It will be a day or so before we hear from our people inside foreign espionage organizations," he added, "but it doesn't look good. Someone very high up is leaking information. Our adversary, in short, has an operative placed high in NASA itself."

The full significance of Hawk's words slowly sank in —Phoenix One was now also in jeopardy.

A light flashed and from the corner of his eye Nick saw Poindexter pick up the telephone. He turned toward Nick, covering the mouthpiece. "It's General McAlester," he said.

"Put him on the conference box so Hawk can listen in."

Poindexter threw a switch and the voice of the NASA Security Chief filled the room. "There's been a fatal accident at the Texas City plant of GKI Industries," he announced tersely. "It happened last night—in the division that manufactures an element of the Apollo life support system. Alex Simian flew in from Miami with his security chief to investigate. He called me a few minutes ago and said that he had something of vital importance to show us. As captain of the second reserve team you should naturally be in on this. We'll pick you up in fifteen minutes."

"Right," said Nick, and swiveled back to face Hawk.

"So it's starting to happen already," said the old man grimly.

CHAPTER 7

THE BIG Fleetwood Eldorado swept along the Gull Freeway.

Outside, the Texas heat was bright, heavy, oppressive. The flat horizon shimmered with it. The limousine's interior was cool, however, almost cold, and the tinted blue windows shaded the eyes of the five men who sat in the comfortable seats.

"Thoughtful of GKI to send their limousine for us," said General McAlester, drumming his fingers broodingly on the edge of his armrest.

"Now, now, Hewlett, don't be cynical," Ray Finney chuckled caustically. "You know Alex Simian can't do enough for us at NASA. And it has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that his company makes only one element in the moon spacecraft and would like to make the whole thing."

"Of course not," laughed McAlester. "What's one million dollars versus twenty billion? Among friends, at any rate?"

Gordon Nash, the captain of the first astronaut team, swiveled around, in the jump seat. "Look, I don't care what the rest of you say about Simian," he snapped. "The guy's all right in my book. If his friendship places a strain on our integrity, that's our problem, not his."

Nick stared out the window, listening to the argument heat up once again. It had sizzled on and off all the way from Houston. Simian, and General Kinetics in general, seemed to be a sore, much discussed point among the four of them.

Ray Finney chimed in once again. "How many houses, boats, cars and TV sets have each of us had to turn down during the last year? I'd hate to have to add their total value up."

"Purely good will," grinned McAlester. "How did Simian put it to that Senate Investigating Committee?"

"That any disclosure of gift offers might destroy the intimate . and confidential nature of NASA's relationships with its contractors," Finney recited with mock solemnity.

Major Sollitz leaned forward and slid the glass paneling shut. McAlester chuckled. "Wasted effort, Duane. I'm sure the whole limousine is bugged, not just our chauffeur. Simian is even more security conscious than you are."

"I just feel we shouldn't go on record as talking about the man this way," Sollitz snapped. "Simian is no different from any other contractor. Aerospace is a roller-coaster business. And with government orders growing bigger, but fewer, the competition is

getting really vicious. If we were in his shoes we'd be doing exactly the same..

"Now, Duane, I don't think that's quite fair," said McAlester.. "There's more to this Simian business than that."

"Undue influence? Then why doesn't NASA drop GKI completely?"

"Because they make the best life support system that can be made," Gordon Nash broke in heatedly. "Because they've made submarines for thirty-five years and know all there is to know about life support whether it's under the ocean or out in space. My life, and Glenn's life here —" he pointed at Nick, "—depend on them. I don't think we should downgrade them."

"No one's downgrading their technical knowhow. It's GKI's financial side that could use some investigating. At least the Cooper Committee seems to think so."

"Look, I'm the first to admit that Alex Simian's reputation is unsavory. He's a wheeler and dealer, there's no denying that. And it's part of the public record that he was once a speculator in commodities. But General Kinetics was a company with no future five years ago. Then Simian took it over—and look at it now."

Nick looked out the window. They had arrived at the outer edges of GKI's sprawling Texas City plant. A tangle of boxlike brick offices, glass-roofed research laboratories and steel-walled hangars went fanning past. Overhead, jet contrails laced the sky, and above the quiet hiss of the Eldorado's air conditioning, Nick could hear the wail of GK-III's taking off to fly directly to U.S. bases in the Far East with the help of in-flight refueling.

The limousine slowed as it approached the main gate. Green-uniformed Security Police with eyes like steel marbles waved them down and leaned in the windows, checking their credentials. Finally they were allowed to move on—but only to a white-and-black barrier manned by more GKI police. A couple of them got down on their hands and knees and peered under the Caddy's suspension. "I only wish we were as thorough at NASA," Sollitz said grimly.

"You forget why we're here," McAlester shot back. "Apparently there's been a breach in all this security."

The barrier was raised and the limousine moved out across a huge concrete apron past the white blocky shapes of workshops, skeletal missile launchers and cavernous machine shops.

Near the center of this open expanse, the Eldorado OMR—3 slowed to a stop. The chauffeur's voice said over the intercom: "Gentlemen, this is as far as I have authorization to go." He pointed through the windshield to a small building set apart from the others. "Mr. Simian is waiting for you at the Spacecraft Simulator."

"Whew!" gasped McAlester at the blast-oven wind that buffeted

them as they got out of the car. Major Sollitz's visored cap blew off. He dashed after it, moving stiffly, awkwardly, grabbing for it with his left hand. "Atta boy, Duane. That's fielding them," chuckled McAlester.

Gordon Nash laughed. He shielded his eyes against the sun and stared at the building. "Gives you a good idea of how small a part the space program plays in GKI's business," he said.

Nick stopped and turned. Something had begun to itch deep down in his mind. Something, some small detail, had raised a tiny question mark.

"Maybe so," said Ray Finney as they started walking, "but all of GKI's Defense Department contracts are up for review this year. And word is the government won't give them any new ones until the Cooper Committee's CPA's have been over their books."

McAlester snorted contemptuously. "Bluff," he said. "It would take ten accountants working ten hours a day at least ten years to unravel Simian's financial empire. The man is richer than any half-dozen small countries you'd want to name, and from what I hear about him, he carries it all in his head. What would the Defense Department do for jet fighters, submarines and missiles while they waited? Get Lionel Toys to build them?"

Major Sollitz fell in step beside Nick. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you, Colonel."

Nick eyed him warily. "Yes?"

Sollitz brushed his cap off carefully before replacing it. "It's about your memory, actually. Ray Finney told me about your dizzy spell on the moonscape this morning . .

"And?"

"Well, as you know, dizziness is one of the aftereffects of Amine poisoning." Sollitz glanced at him, choosing his words carefully. "The other one is memory lapses."

Nick stopped and turned to face him. "Get to the point, Major."

"All right. I'll be frank. Have you noticed any trouble of that sort, Colonel? The time area in which I'm specifically interested is just before you entered the capsule prototype. If possible, I'd like a second-by-second breakdown of events leading up to it. For instance, chances are you caught a glimpse of someone adjusting the controls outside. It would be a great help if you could recall a few details ..."

Nick was relieved to hear General McAlester calling them. "Duane, Glenn, hurry up. I want to present Simian with a solid front."

Nick turned, saying, "Bits and pieces of it are beginning to come back, Major. Why don't I give you a full report—in writing—tomorrow?"

Sollitz nodded. "I think that would be advisable, Colonel."

Simian was standing just inside the entryway of the small building, talking to a group of men. He glanced up as they approached. "Gentlemen," he said, "I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances."

He was a big, bony man with hunched shoulders, a long-nosed face and loose limbs. His head was shaven clean as a billiard ball, reinforcing the already strong resemblance to an eagle (gossip columnists hinted that he preferred this to a receding hairline). He had the high cheekbones and ruddy complexion of a Cossack, and his Sulka tie and expensive Pierre Cardin suit only emphasized it. Nick put his age at somewhere between forty-five and fifty.

Quickly he reviewed what he knew about the man— and was surprised to find that it was all conjecture, gossip column stuff. There was nothing really solid. His true name (it was said): Alexander Leonovitch Simianski. Birthplace: Khabarovsk, in Siberia's Far East—but once again it was largely conjecture. Federal investigators could neither prove nor disprove this, any more than they could document his story that he was a White Russian, born the son of a general in the Czarist army. The truth was that no documents existed that showed anything about Alexander Simian before he turned up in the 1930's in Tsingtao, one of the treaty ports of China before the war.

The financier shook hands with each of them, greeting them by name and exchanging a few brief words. He had a deep, deliberate voice with no trace of an accent. Neither foreign nor regional. It was neutral. A radio announcer's voice. Nick had heard that it could take on an almost hypnotic quality when he was describing a deal to a prospective investor.

When he came to Nick, Simian gave him a playful half-punch. "Well, Colonel, still playing a hand for exactly what it's worth?" he chuckled. Nick winked enigmatically and moved on, wondering what in hell he was referring to.

Two of the men with whom Simian had been talking turned out to be FBI agents. The third, a tall, affable redhead wearing a green GK3 police uniform, was introduced as his Chief of Security, Clint Sands. "Mr. Simian an' All flew in from Florida last night as soon as we heard what happened," drawled Sands. "If y'all follow me," he added, "Ah'll show you what we found."

The spacecraft simulator was a charred ruin. The wiring and controls had melted from the heat, and fragments of human flesh still sticking to the inside hatch cover testified to how hot the metal itself must have gotten.

"How many fatalities?" asked General McAlester, peering inside.

"There were two men working in there," said Simian, "testing the ECS system. Same thing happened as at the Cape—an oxygen

atmosphere flash fire. We've traced it to an electrical cord powering a work lamp. We've further established that a break in its plastic insulation allowed the wire to create an electrical arc against the aluminum flooring."

"We conducted tests with an identical wire," drawled Sands. "They indicated that an arc like that would ignite combustibles within a radius of twelve to fourteen inches."

"This is the original wire," said Simian, holding it out for them to see. "It's badly melted, of course, fused with a section of flooring, but look at the break. It's cut, not worn away. And this clinches it." He held out a tiny file and a magnifying glass. "Pass them around, please. The file was found wedged between the floor plate and a bundle of wiring. Whoever used it must have dropped it and been unable to retrieve it. It's made of tungsten, which is why it was undamaged by the heat. Please notice the legend engraved on the tip of the handle—the letters YCK. I think anyone who knows Asia or who knows tools will tell you that this file was manufactured in Red China by the Chong Company of Foochow. They still use the same stamping device as they did in pre-Red days."

He eyed each of them in turn. "Gentlemen," he said, "I'm convinced that we're faced with a program of organized sabotage, and I'm further convinced that the Chinese Reds are behind it. I think that the Chicoms are out to destroy both the U.S. and the Soviet moon programs. You'll recall what happened to Soyuz One last year—when the Russian astronaut, Komarov, was killed." He paused for dramatic emphasis, then said: "You can pursue any course of investigation you choose, but my security force is proceeding on the assumption that Peking is behind our troubles."

Clint Sands nodded. "It's not over, either—not by a Jong shot. There was another incident up at the Cape yesterday. A bus full of Space Center dependents went out of control an' crashed into a ditch on its way back from Orlando. Nobody was seriously hurt, but the kids were shaken up, and the women were all pretty hysterical; They said it was no accident. Turns out they were right. We had the steering column checked. It was sawed through. So we had them flown down to the GKI Medical Center in Miami at Mr. Simian's expense. At least they'll be safe there."

Major Sollitz nodded. "Probably the best thing under the circumstances," he said. "The overall security picture at the Cape is a shambles."

Nick wanted that tungsten file for AXE's lab but there was no way of getting it, short of blowing his cover. So the two FBI men walked off with it. He made a mental note to have Hawk officially request it later.

As they walked back to the limousine, Simian said, "I'm going to have the spacecraft simulator's remains sent to NASA's Langley Research Center at Hampton, Virginia, for intricate dissection by experts. When this is all over," he added suddenly, "and the Apollo program gets under way again, I hope you will all agree to be my guests at Cathay for a week."

"There's nothing I'd enjoy more," chuckled Gordon Nash. "Unofficially, of course."

As their limousine pulled away, General McAlester said heatedly, "I want you to know, Duane, that I take strong exception to your remark about security conditions at Cape Kennedy. That bordered on the insubordinate."

"Why don't you finally face it?" snapped Sollitz. "There's no decent security possible if the contractors don't cooperate with us. And Connelly Aviation never has. Their policing system isn't worth a damn. If we were working with GKI on the Apollo Project we'd have a thousand extra security men to draw on."

"That's certainly the impression Simian is trying to get across," McAlester fired back. "Who exactly are you working for—NASA or GKI?"

"We may all be working with GKI yet," said Ray Finney. "That Senate post mortem is sure to feature all the accidents that have plagued Connelly Aviation. If one-more happens in the interim, a crisis of confidence will follow and the moon contract will be up for grabs. GKI is the logical successor. If its technical proposal is sharp, its bid low, I think NASA's top brass will overlook Simian's management and award the contract to them."

"Let's drop the subject," snapped Sollitz.

"Fine by me," said Finney. He turned to Nick. "What was that crack Simian made about playing your hand for what it was worth?"

Nick's mind rapidly considered answers. Before he could come up with a satisfactory one, Gordon Nash laughed and said, "Poker. He and Glenn had a big game when we were at his place in Palm Beach last year. Glenn must have dropped a couple of hundred—didn't .you, buddy?"

"Gambling? An astronaut?" Ray Finney chuckled. "That's comparable to Batman burning his draft card."

"You can't avoid it when you're around Simian," said Nash. "He's a born gambler, the kind of guy who'll bet on how many birds are going to fly overhead during the next hour. That's how he made his millions, I guess. Taking risks, gambling."

The telephone rang just before dawn.

Nick reached groggily for it. Gordon Nash's voice said, "Let's roll,

buddy. We're leaving for Cape Kennedy within the hour. Something's up." His voice was tight with suppressed excitement. "Maybe we're going to make another try. Anyway, mum's the word, and I'll pick you up in twenty minutes. Don't bring anything with you. All our gear is packed and waiting at Ellington."

Nick hung up and dialed Poindexter's basement extension. "Project Phoenix is go," he told the man from Editing. "What are your instructions? Do you follow or stay?"

"I stay here on a backup basis," Poindexter replied. "If your field of operations shifts back here, this will be your base. Your man at the Cape has already set things up at that end. It's L-32. Peterson. He can be contacted through NASA Security there. Sight recognition is enough. Good luck, N3."

CHAPTER 8

BUTTONS WERE PRESSED, levers pulled. The telescopic drawbridge drew back. The doors closed, and the mobile lounge moved on its huge wheels with slow and deliberate menace toward the waiting 707.

The two astronaut teams stood tensely beside their mountains of equipment. They were surrounded by doctors, project technicians and pad leaders. A few minutes earlier they had received a terse briefing from Flight Director Ray Finney. They now knew about Project Phoenix and that it was scheduled for lift-off in exactly ninety-six hours.

"I wish it was us that were going," said John Corbinet. "It's standing around and waiting that makes you nervous about going up again."

"Yeah, well don't forget we were originally the backup team for Liscombe's flight," said Bill Ransom. "So maybe you'll be going yet."

"That's not funny," snapped Gordon Nash. "Stow it."

"You had better relax, all of you," said Dr. Sun, unstrapping the constrictor from around Roger Caine's right arm. "Your blood pressure is above normal for this hour, Commander. Try to get some sleep on the flight. If you need them, I have some non-narcotic sleeping pills. This is going to be a long countdown. Don't tense up now."

Nick watched her with cold admiration. When she'd taken his blood pressure she had stared him right in the eye the whole time. Defiantly, icily, without once blinking. That was hard to do with someone you had just ordered killed. For all the talk about slick espionage agents, a person's eyes were still the windows of his mind. And they were rarely altogether blank.

His fingers brushed against the photograph in his pocket. He had brought it with him, intending to push buttons, to make things happen. He wondered what he would see in Joy Sun's eyes when she looked at it and realized that the game was up.

He watched her as she studied a medical chart—dark, tall, superbly beautiful, her mouth made up with fashionably pale .651 lipstick (no matter the pressure, the result was always a pink film .651mm. thick). He imagined her pale and gasping, her mouth distended with shock, hot tears of shame in her eyes. He wanted to shatter that perfect mask of a face, he suddenly realized, wanted to take ropes of her black hair in his hands and bend her cold and arrogant body back under his. With a rush of genuine surprise Nick knew that he wanted Joy Sim physically.

The lounge suddenly Jerked to a stop. Lights flashed. An indistinct voice barked something over the intercom. The Air Force sergeant at the controls threw a switch. The doors opened and the drawbridge slid forward. Major Sollitz leaned out of the door of the Boeing 707. He had a battery-operated P.A. megaphone in his hand. He raised it to his lips.

"There's going to be a delay," he announced tersely. "There's been a bomb scare. That's probably all it is—a scare. But the result is that we're going to have to take the 707 apart piece by piece. We're readying another, meanwhile, over on Runway Twelve, so you won't be held up any longer than necessary. Thank you."

Bill Ransom shook his head. "I don't like the sound of that."

"Probably just a routine fail-safe check on security procedures," said Gordon Nash.

"I'll bet some practical joker phoned in an anonymous tip."

"Then he's a highly placed practical joker," said Nash. "In the top ranks of NASA. Because nobody below JCS level even knew about this flight."

That was what Nick had just been thinking, and it worried him. He thought back over the events of the previous afternoon, his mind reaching for that evasive little piece of information that had tried to make itself heard. But each time he thought he had it, it scampered away and hid again.

The 707 climbed speedily and effortlessly, its great jet engines pouring out their long, thin vapor trails as they soared up through the cloud layer to where the sun was bright and the sky blue.

There were only fourteen passengers altogether and they were scattered through the huge aircraft, most of them lying stretched out across three seats at a time, sleeping.

But not N3. And not Dr. Sun.

He had taken the seat next to her before she'd had a chance to object. Tiny pinpricks of anxiety had flickered in her eyes and then had just as swiftly been masked.

Nick gazed past her now, out the window at the white wool clouds billowing along below the jet. They had been airborne half an hour. "How about a cup of coffee and a chat?" he suggested amiably.

"Stop playing games," she snapped. "I know perfectly well you're not Colonel Eglund."

Nick pressed the buzzer. The Air Force sergeant who doubled as a steward approached along the aisle. "Two cups of coffee," said Nick. "One black and one ..." He turned toward her.

"Also black." When the sergeant had gone, she said, "Who are you? A government agent?"

"What makes you think I'm not Eglund?"

She turned away from him. "Your body," she said, and to his surprise he saw that she was blushing. "It's ... well, it's different."

Suddenly, without warning, he said, "Who did you send to kill me in the Lunar Vehicle?"

Her head snapped around. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't try to kid me," rasped N3. He pulled the snapshot out of his pocket and handed it to her. "I see you're doing your hair differently now."

She sat rigidly composed. Her eyes were very wide, very dark. Without moving a muscle, except for her mouth, she said, "Where did you get this?"

He turned, watching the sergeant approach with the coffee. "They're selling them on Forty-second Street," he said harshly.

The blast wave slammed against him. The floor of the aircraft tilted sharply. Nick saw the sergeant grabbing at a seat, trying to regain his balance. The coffee cups went flying.

As his eardrums were relieved from the sonic pressure of the explosion Nick heard a fantastic howl, almost a scream. He was sucked violently against the back of the seat in front of him. He heard the girl scream, saw her flung against it, too.

The sergeant lost his grip. His body seemed to elongate toward a howling white aperture. There was a crash as his head went through it and his shoulders hit the frame, then his whole body was gone—sucked with a terrible whistling noise through the aperture. The girl was still screaming, her fist pressed against her teeth, her eyes starting from her head at what she had just witnessed.

The aircraft tilted violently. Seats were being sucked through the opening now. From the corner of his eye, Nick saw cushions, luggage and pieces of equipment sailing out into the sky. The unoccupied seats in front of them folded in half and their stuffings exploded. Wires came down from the ceiling. The floor buckled up. The lights went out.

Then suddenly he was in the air, floating toward the ceiling. The girl shot past him. As her head hit the ceiling, he grabbed her foot and pulled her toward him, tugging her down by her dress, inch by inch, until her face was level with his. They were upside down now, lying on the ceiling. Her eyes were closed. Her face was pale, and blood made a dark wriggling line down the side of it.

The screaming sound tore at his eardrums. Something crashed into him. It was Gordon Nash. Something else bumped his foot. He looked down. It was a member of the medical team, his neck hanging at an odd angle. Nick looked past them. The bodies of the other passengers came floating through the fuselage from the front of the aircraft, bobbing against the ceiling like corks.

N3 knew what was happening. The jet was out of control, plunging through space at fantastic speed, creating a condition of weightlessness.

To his astonishment, he felt someone tug at his sleeve. He forced his head around. Gordon Nash's mouth was moving. It formed the words, Follow me. The astronaut pulled himself forward, moving hand over hand along the luggage rack. Nick followed. Nash, he remembered suddenly, had walked in space on two Gemini missions. Weightlessness was nothing new to him.

He saw what Nash was trying to reach and understood. The inflatable life raft. There was a problem, though. The hydraulic component of the access door had been sheared off. The heavy metal section, which was actually part of the fuselage skin, wouldn't budge. Nick signaled Nash to move aside and "swam" over to the mechanism. From his pocket he took the tiny two-pronged wire he sometimes used to start the motors of locked cars. With it he managed to fire the battery-powered emergency explosive cap. The access door swung open.

Nick seized an edge of the life raft before it was sucked out the gaping aperture. He found the inflating mechanism and triggered it. It expanded with a fierce swoosh to twice the size of the aperture. He and Nash worked it into position. It wouldn't last long, but while it did, it would allow someone to reach the cockpit.

A giant fist seemed to slam into his ribs. He found himself lying face down on the floor. There was a taste of blood in his mouth. An object hit him in the back. Gordon Nash's foot. Nick craned his head around, saw the rest of him wedged between two seats. The other passengers came peeling off the ceiling behind him. The high scream of the engines deepened. Gravity was reasserting itself. The crew must have succeeded in lifting the jet's nose above the horizon line.

He crawled toward the cockpit, pulling himself along from seat to seat, struggling against the terrific slipstream. He knew that if the life raft went, so would he. But he had to reach the crew, had to file a last report over their radio if it turned out they were doomed.

Five faces turned toward him as he swung the cockpit door open. "What happened?" the pilot shouted. "What's the situation back there?"

"Bomb," Nick shot back. "Looks bad. Hole ripped in the fuselage. We've got it plugged—but only temporarily."

Four red alarm lights started to flash on the flight engineer's console. "Pressure and quantity!" the F.E. barked at the pilot. "Pressure and quantity!"

There was a smell of fright-sweat and cigarette smoke in the cockpit. The pilot and co-pilot began to push and pull at switches as

the navigator's monotonous drawl continued: "AFB Bobbie. This is Speedbird 410. C-ALGY calling B for Bobbie ..."

There was a crunch of tearing metal and all eyes shifted to the right. "There goes No. 3," rasped the co-pilot as the inboard pod on the right wing tore away from the plane.

"What are our chances of making it down in one piece?" demanded Nick.

"At this point, Colonel, your guess is as good as mine. I'd say . .

The pilot was interrupted by a sharp voice on the overhead amplifier. "C-ALGY give your position. C-ALGY ..."

The navigator gave their position and reported on the situation. "We've got a go-ahead," he said a moment later.

"We're going to try for Barksdale AFB at Shreveport, Louisiana," said the pilot. "They've got the longest runways around. But first we've got to use up our fuel. So we're going to be in the air for at least another two hours. I suggest you get everybody belted in back there, then just sit tight—and pray!"

Gouts of black smoke and orange flame poured from the three remaining jet nacelles. The huge aircraft shook violently as they banked their way through a tight turn over Barksdale Air Force Base.

The wind roared through the jet's interior, sucking violently at them. The safety straps cut into their midsections. There was a metallic, ripping sound, and more of the fuselage split open. Air rushed through the growing aperture with a shrill scream—like a can of hair spray with a hole punched in it.

Nick turned, glancing at Joy Sun. Her mouth was shaking. There were violet shadows under her eyes. Fear crawled over her, slimy and ugly. "Are we going to make it?" she gasped.

He watched her, eyes carefully blank. Fear would give him answers that even torture wouldn't. "It doesn't look good," he said.

So far two men had died—the Air Force sergeant and a member of the NASA medical team whose spinal cord had been snapped by the impact with which he'd struck the ceiling. Another man—a pad technician—was strapped into his seat but was critically injured. Nick didn't think he would survive. The astronauts were shaken up but none was seriously hurt. They were used to emergencies, hadn't panicked. Dr. Sun's injury, a scalp wound, was superficial—but her fear wasn't. N3 now took advantage of it. "I want answers to questions," he rasped. "You won't gain anything by not answering. Your pals have double-crossed you, so apparently you're expendable. Who planted the bomb?"

Hysteria was mounting in her eyes. "Bomb? What bomb?" she gasped. "You don't think I had anything to do with this, do you? How

could I? Why would I be here?"

"Then what about that pornographic snapshot?" he demanded. "What about your connection with Pat Hammer? You were seen together at the Bali Hai. Don Lee said so."

She shook her head violently. "Don Lee lied," she gasped. "I've been to the Bali Hai only once and not with Hammer. I didn't know him personally. My work never brought me in contact with the Cape Kennedy launch crews." She didn't say anything for a moment, then the words seemed torn from her mouth. "J went to the Bali Hai because Alex Simian sent me a message to meet him there."

"Simian? What's your connection with him?"

"I worked at the GKI Medical Institute in Miami," she panted. "Before I joined NASA." There was another ripping sound, this time of fabric, and the inflated life raft went squeezing through the aperture and vanished with a loud boom. The air screamed through the fuselage now, buffeting them, ripping their hair, deflating their cheeks. She clutched at him. Automatically he put his arm around her. "My God!" she sobbed brokenly. "How much longer before we can land?"

"Talk."

"All right, there was more to it than that!" she said fiercely. "We had an affair. I was in love with him—still am, I suppose. I first met him when I was just a girl. It was in Shanghai, around 1948. He came to visit my father, to interest him in a deal." She was talking fast now, trying to control her mounting panic. "Simian had spent the war years in a POW camp in the Philippines. After the war he'd gone into the ramie-fiber business there. He learned that the Communists were about to take over China. He knew that this would create a shortage of the fiber. My father had a warehouse full of ramie in Shanghai. Simian wanted to buy it. My father agreed. Later my father and he became partners and I saw a lot of him."

Her eyes glinted white with fear as another section of fuselage wrenched loose. "I had a crush on him. A schoolgirl kind of thing. I was heartbroken when he married an American woman in Manila. That was in 'fifty-three. Later I found out why he did it. He'd been involved in a number of swindles and the men he'd ruined were after him. Marrying this woman enabled him to emigrate to the U.S., to take out citizenship. As soon as he had his first papers, he divorced her."

Nick knew the rest of the story. It was a part of U.S. business legend. Simian had invested in the stock market, had made a killing, had proceeded to take over a number of failing firms. He'd pumped life into them, then had sold them at fantastically inflated prices. "He's brilliant but absolutely ruthless," Joy Sun said, her eyes staring

past Nick at the widening aperture. "After he gave me a job at GKI we had an affair. It was inevitable. But after a year he grew bored and broke it off." She buried her face in her hands. "He didn't come to me and say it was over," she whispered. "He had me fired and in the process did his best to ruin my reputation." She shook her head at the memory of it. "Still I couldn't get him out of my system and when I received that message from him —it was about two months ago—I went to the Bali Hai."

"He called you directly?"

"No, he always works through intermediaries. This time it was a man called Johnny Hung Fat. Johnny had been involved in a couple of financial scandals with him. He was ruined by it. He ended up as a waiter at the Bali Hai. It was Johnny who told me Alex wanted to meet me there. Simian never showed, though, and I got steadily drunker. Finally Johnny brought this man over. He's the manager of the discotheque there ..."

"Reno Tree?"

She nodded. "He made a pass at me. My pride was hurt and I was drunk and I think they must have put something in my drink, because the next thing I knew we were on the couch in the office and ... I couldn't get enough of him." She shivered slightly and turned away. "I never knew they'd taken pictures of us. It was dark. I don't see how ..."

"Infrared film."

"I suppose Johnny was planning to shake me down later. At any rate I don't think Alex had anything to do with it. Johnny must have just used his name as a come-on ..."

Nick decided the hell with that, if he was going to die he at least wanted to watch. The ground came rising up to meet them. Emergency vehicles, ambulances, men in aluminum fire suits went fanning past, already in motion. He felt a gentle thud as the plane touched down. Minutes later they rolled to an even gentler stop and the passengers spilled joyously down the emergency chutes to the solid, blessed earth ...

They remained at Barksdale for seven hours while a team of Air Force doctors checked them over, distributed medicines and first aid to those who needed it, and hospitalized two of the more serious cases.

At 5:00 P.M., an Air Force Globemaster arrived from Patrick AFB and they boarded it for the final leg of their journey. An hour later they landed at McCoy Field in Orlando, Florida.

The place was crawling with FBI and NASA Security people. White-helmeted MP's herded them toward the restricted military area of the field where Army scout cars were waiting. "Where are we headed?"

Nick asked.

“A lot of NASA brass flew down from Washington,” one of the MP’s replied. “Looks like it’s going to be an all-night Q-&-A session.”

Nick tugged at Joy Sun’s sleeve. They were near the tail end of the miniature parade and gradually, step by step, they dropped farther back into the darkness. “Come on,” he said suddenly. “This way.” They dodged behind a petroleum truck, then doubled back toward the civilian area of the field and the taxi ramp he’d sighted earlier. “First thing we need is a drink,” he said.

Any answers he had he was going to funnel straight to Hawk, not to the FBI, not to the CIA, and—above all— not to NASA Security.

In the cocktail lounge of the Cherry Plaza, overlooking Lake Eola, he and Joy Sun talked. They’d been doing a lot of talking—the kind of talking people do who’ve been through a devastating experience together. “Look, I’ve been wrong about you,” Nick said. “It breaks every tooth in my head to admit it, but what else can I say? I had you pegged as the adversary.”

“And now?”

He grinned. “I think you’re a big, juicy red herring that someone tossed in my path.”

She threw her head back to laugh—and the color suddenly drained from her face. Nick glanced up. It was the cocktail lounge’s ceiling. It was mirrored. “My God!” she gasped. “That’s just how it was in the plane—upside down. It’s like seeing it all over again.” She began to shake, and Nick put his arm around her. “Please,” she murmured, “take me home.” He nodded. They both knew what would happen there.

CHAPTER 9

HOME WAS A BUNGALOW in Cocoa Beach.

They got there by cab from Orlando and Nick didn't care that their journey would be easy to trace.

So far he had a reasonably good cover story. He and Joy Sun had been talking in low voices on the plane, walking hand in hand at McCoy Field—things incipient lovers were expected to do. Now, after a draining emotional experience, they had sneaked off to be by themselves a while. Not exactly what was expected of a true-blue astronaut perhaps but at any rate not actionable. Not immediately, anyway. He had until morning—and that would be time enough.

Until then McAlester would have to cover for him.

The bungalow was a squared-off block of stucco and cinder right on the beach. A small living room ran the entire width of it. It was pleasantly furnished with bamboo beach chairs upholstered in foam rubber. Palm leaf matting covered the floor. There were broad windows facing the Atlantic, to the right of them a door that led to a bedroom and, beyond that, another door leading out onto the beach.

"Everything's a mess," she said. "I left so suddenly for Houston after the accident that I didn't have a chance to clean up."

She bolted the door behind her and stood against it, watching him. Her face was no longer a cold and beautiful mask. The broad, high cheekbones were still there, the finely sculptured hollows. But her eyes flickered from the aftermath of shock and her voice had lost its cool certainty. For the first time she looked like a woman instead of a mechanical goddess.

Desire began to build up inside Nick. He moved to her quickly, gathering her into his arms, kissing her hard on the lips. They were firm and cold but the warmth of her struggling breasts shot through him like a current. The heat grew. He could feel a pulse beating in his thighs. He kissed her again, his mouth hard and brutal against hers. He heard a smothered "No!" She tore her lips away from his and pushed against him with her clenched fists. "Your face!"

For a second he didn't know what she meant. "Eglund," she said. "I'm kissing a mask." She shot him a shaky smile. "Do you realize that I've seen your body, but never the face that goes with it?"

"I'll go peel Eglund off." He headed toward the bathroom. It was time the astronaut was retired anyway. The interior of Poindexter's masterpiece had turned soggy in the heat. The silicone-emulsion had begun to itch intolerably. Besides, his cover value was at an end now, too. Jivents on the plane from Houston suggested that "Eglund's"

presence was actually a danger to the other Moon Project astronauts.

He took his shirt off, wrapped a towel around his neck, then carefully peeled away the pliable plastic hair mask. He fished the foam padding out from inside his cheeks, pulled the blond eyebrows off and rubbed his face vigorously, smudging and smearing the leftover makeup. Then he leaned over the sink and popped the hazel-pupiled contact lenses out of his eye sockets. He glanced up to see Joy Sun's reflection in the mirror, watching him from the doorway.

"A definite improvement," she smiled, and in the reflection of her face the eyes moved, traveling the length of his metal-smooth torso. All the muscular grace of a panther was packed into that magnificent frame and her eyes missed none of it.

He turned to face her, wiping the last of the silicone from his features. The steel-gray eyes that could smolder somberly or turn icy bright with cruelty were lit with, laughter. "Do I pass the physical, Doc?"

"So many scars," she said in wonderment. "Knife. Bullet wound. Razor slash." She ticked the descriptions off as her finger traced their jagged courses. His muscles contracted at her touch. He took a deep breath, feeling the tension knot below his stomach.

"Appendectomy, gall bladder operation," he said tightly. "Don't romanticize."

"I'm a doctor, remember? Don't try to kid me." She glanced up at him, eyes bright. "You never answered my question. Are you some kind of super-secret agent?"

He pulled her to him, propping her chin up with his hand. "You mean they didn't tell you?" he grinned. "I'm from the planet Krypton." He touched the wetness of her lips with his—softly at first, then harder. There was a nervous tautness in her body that resisted for a second, but then she softened and with a small whimper her eyes closed and her mouth became a hungry little animal searching for his, hot and wet, the tip of her tongue probing for satisfaction. He felt her fingers undoing his belt. The blood pumped within him. Desire grew like a tree. Her hands moved, trembling, over his body. She took her mouth away, buried her head against his neck a second, then drew back. "Wow!" she said shakily.

"Bedroom," he grunted, need exploding in him like a gun.

"Oh God, yes, I think you're the one I've been waiting for." Her breath came in heaving gulps. "After Simian... then that business at the Bali Hai ... I was off men. I thought for good. But you could be different. I see that now. Oh lovely, dammit," she shuddered as he drew her to him, thigh to thigh, breast to breast, and in the same movement ripped open her blouse. She wore no bra—he'd known that from the way the ripe cones had moved beneath the material. Her

nipples were firm points against his chest. She writhed against him, her hands exploring his body, her mouth glued to his, her tongue a darting, fleshy sword.

Without breaking contact, he half lifted, half carried her across the hall and over the palm leaf matting to the bed.

He laid her down on it and she nodded, beyond speech, as his hands moved about her body, unzipping her skirt, smoothing her thighs. He leaned over her, kissing her breasts, his lips crushing into their softness. She moaned softly and he felt her warmth spread open beneath him.

Then he wasn't thinking any more, just feeling, bursting out of the nightmare world of treachery and sudden death that was his natural habitat and into a bright, sensual flow of time that was like a great river, concentrating on the feel of the girl's perfect body, floating on the ever-quickenning tempo until they hit the rapids and her hands caressed him with a growing urgency, and her fingers dug into him and her mouth melted against his in final supplication and their bodies tensed and arched and flowed together, thighs straining deliciously and mouths blending, and she sighed a long, shuddering, happy sigh and let her head fall back against the pillows as she felt the sudden quiver of him at the springing of his seed ...

They lay for a while in silence, her hands moving rhythmically, hypnotically over his skin. Nick drifted toward the edge of sleep. Then, because he had stopped thinking about it for the last few minutes, it suddenly came to him. The sensation was almost physical: bright light flooded into his head. He had it! The missing key!

At the same instant, terrifyingly loud in the stillness, came a hammering sound. He threw himself away from her but she came up with him, entangling him in soft and caressing curves, unwilling to relinquish him. She wound her curves about him so that even in this sudden crisis he came close to forgetting his peril.

"Anybody in there?" a voice shouted.

Nick broke free and darted to a window. He drew the Venetian blinds aside a fraction of an inch. An unmarked patrol car with a whip antenna was parked out front. Two figures wearing white crash helmets and riding breeches were shining their flashlights through the living room window. Nick gestured to the girl, directing her to throw something on and to answer the door.

She did, and he stood with his ear against the bedroom door, listening. "Howdy, Ma'am, we didn't know you were home," a male voice said. "Just checking. The outside light was off. Last four nights it's been on." A second male voice said, "You're Dr. Sun, aren't you?" He heard Joy say that she was. "You just got in from Houston, is that right?" She said it was. "Everything okay? Nothing disturbed in the

house while you were away?" She said everything was as it should be and the first male voice said, "Okay, we just wanted to make sure. After some of the things that have happened around here you can't be too careful. If you need us fast, just dial zero three times. We're on a direct hookup now."

"Thank you, officers. Good night." He heard the front door close. "More of those GKI police," she said as she came back into the bedroom. "They seem to be every place." She stopped in her tracks. "You're going," she said accusingly.

"Have to," he said, buttoning his shirt. "And what's worse, I'm going to add insult to injury by asking if I can borrow your car."

"That part I like," she smiled. "It means you'll have to bring it back. First thing in the morning, too, please. I mean that ..." She suddenly stopped, a stricken look on her face. "My God, I don't even know your name!"

"Nick Carter."

She laughed. "Not very imaginative, but I suppose in your business one phony name is as good as another ..."

All ten lines at the NASA Administration Center were busy and he began redialing the numbers without stopping so that the moment a call ended he'd get his chance.

A single image kept flashing through his mind—Major Sollitz, chasing his hat, his left hand reaching awkwardly across his body for it, his right arm held rigidly against his torso. Something had bothered him about that scene out at the Texas City plant yesterday afternoon, but what it was kept eluding him—until he'd stopped thinking about it for a moment. Then it had quietly surfaced into his consciousness.

Sollitz had been right-handed yesterday morning!

His mind raced along the complicated ramifications spreading in all directions from this discovery as his fingers automatically dialed and his ear listened for the ringing sound of a cleared connection.

He sat on the edge of the bed in his room at the Gemini Inn, hardly noticing the neat stack of suitcases that Hank Peterson had delivered from Washington, or the keys to the Lamborghini on the night stand, or the note under them that read, Let me know when you get in. The extension is L-32. Hank.

Sollitz was the missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle. Take him into account and everything else fell neatly into place. Nick remembered the Major's shock when he'd first come walking into his office and quietly he cursed himself. That should have been the tip-off. But he'd been too blinded by the sun—Dr. Sun—to notice anyone else's behavior.

Joy Sun had been surprised, too, but it was she who'd first

diagnosed Eglund's condition as Amine poisoning. So her surprise was natural. She simply hadn't expected to see him back so soon.

A line cleared at the Administration Center.

"Red Room," he told them in Glenn Eglund's Kansas drawl. "This is Eagle Four. Give me the Red Room."

The wire hummed and twanged and a man's voice came on. "Security," he said. "Captain Leasor speaking."

"This is Eagle Four, top priority. Is Major Sollitz there?"

"Eagle Four, they've been looking for you. You missed the debriefing at McCoy. Where are you now?"

"Never mind that," said Nick impatiently. "Is Sollitz there?"

"No. He's not."

"Well find him. This is top priority."

"Hold on. I'll check."

Who, besides Sollitz, would have known about Phoenix One? Who, besides the Apollo Security Chief, could have had the run of the Medical Research Section of the Spacecraft Center? Who else knew every phase of the medical program, had an intimate knowledge of its dangers, could be seen anywhere without raising suspicion? Who else had the run of both the Houston and Cape Kennedy facilities?

Sollitz, N3 was now convinced, was the Sol who met with Pat Hammer at the Bali Hai in Palm Beach and plotted the destruction of the Apollo capsule. Sollitz tried to kill Glenn Eglund when the astronaut found out what the Major was up to. Sollitz hadn't been told, however, about Nick's masquerade. Only General McAlester knew about that. So when "Eglund" turned up again, Sollitz had panicked. It was he who had tried to kill him on the moonscape. The giveaway was the right-to left-hand switch, the result of the broken wrist he'd sustained in the struggle over the knife.

Now Nick understood the point of all those questions about his memory. And Eglund's reply that "bits and pieces" were slowly coming back had further panicked the Major. So he'd planted a bomb on a "standby" plane, then had manufactured a phony bomb scare enabling him to substitute the alternate aircraft for the original one without having it first checked out by a demolition team.

A crisp voice came on the wire. "Eagle Four, this is General McAlester. Where in hell did you and Dr. Sun disappear to after your plane landed at McCoy? You left a whole gaggle of top security brass cooling their heels there."

"General, I'll explain everything to you in a minute, but first—where's Major Sollitz? It's of the utmost importance that we find him."

"I don't know," said McAlester flatly. "And no one else seems to, either. He arrived at McCoy on the second plane. We know that much. But he disappeared somewhere in the ail terminal and hasn't turned

up since. Why?"

Nick asked if their conversation was being scrambled. It was. So he told him. "My God," was all the NASA Security Chief could say at the end of it.

"Sollitz isn't the boss," Nick added. "He's been doing the dirty work for someone else. The USSR maybe. Peking. At this point it's anyone's guess."

"But how in hell did he get security clearance? How did he manage to rise as far as he did?"

"I don't know," said Nick. "I hope his records will give us a clue. I'm going to have Peterson radio AXE with a full report and also request an exhaustive background check on Sollitz as well as on Alex Simian of GKI. I want to double check on what Joy Sun told me about him."

"I've just been speaking to Hawk," said McAlester. "He told me Glenn Eglund has finally recovered consciousness at Walter Reed. They hope to question him soon."

"Speaking of Eglund," said Nick. "Could you arrange for the phony one to suffer a relapse? With the Phoenix countdown under way and the astronauts tied to their stations, his cover is turning into a handicap. I've got to be free to move around."

"It can be arranged," said McAlester. He sounded happy about it. "It'll explain why you and Dr. Sun wandered off. Amnesia from hitting your head in the plane. And she went after you to try to bring you back."

Nick said that was fine and hung up. He fell across the bed. He was too tired to even get undressed. He was glad everything was working out so neatly for McAlester. He wished something convenient would happen along his way for a change. It did. He fell asleep.

He was awakened an instant later by the phone. At least it seemed an instant, but it couldn't have been because it was light out. Groggily he reached for the receiver. "Hello?"

"Finally!" exclaimed Candy Sweet. "Where have you been for the last three days? I've been trying to get you."

"Called away," he said vaguely. "What's up?"

"I've found something terrifically important out on Merritt Island," she said excitedly. "Meet me in the lobby in half an hour."

CHAPTER 10

THE EARLY MORNING FOG had begun to burn off. Ragged blue holes opened and closed in the grayness. Through them Nick caught brief glimpses of orange grove plantings swinging past like the spokes in a wheel.

Candy was driving. She had insisted that they take her car—a sporty GT model Giulia. She had also insisted that he wait and actually see her discovery. She couldn't—she said—tell him about it.

Still playing it like a little girl, he decided sourly. He glanced over at her. The hip-huggers had been replaced by a white miniskirt which, together with her midriff blouse and white tennis shoes and her fresh-scrubbed blonde prettiness, gave her the look of a high school cheerleader.

She felt him watching her and turned. “Not much farther,” she smiled. “It’s just north of the Dummitt Grove.”

The Space Center’s moon port occupied only a small part of Merritt Island. More than seventy thousand acres had been leased back to the farmers who had originally owned the orange groves. The road north from the Bennett Causeway ran through a wilderness of swamp and scrub woods broken up by the Indian River, Seedless Enterprise and Dummitt Groves, all of them dating back to the 1830’s.

The road curved now around a small inlet and they passed a bunch of tumbledown shacks on stilts at the water’s edge, a combination gas station-grocery store, and a small boatyard with a fishing dock lined with shrimp trawlers. “Enterprise,” she said. “It’s directly across from Port Canaveral. We’re almost there.”

They went another quarter of a mile and Candy put on the right-turn indicator and began to slow up. She pulled the car off onto the shoulder of the road and came to a stop. She turned to look at him. “We’re here.” She picked up her purse and opened the door on her side.

Nick got out on his and stood there, looking around. They were in the middle of an open, desolate area. A wide vista of salt-water flats stretched away to the Banana River on their right. Northward the flats turned to swamp. The thickly matted growth crowded right to the water’s edge. Three hundred yards to their left, the electrified fence of MILA (the moon port’s Merritt Island Launching Area) began. Through the scrub woods he could make out the Phoenix One’s concrete launching pad atop a gentle slope and, four miles beyond it, the bright orange girders and open-work platforms of the 56-story Vehicular Assembly Building.

A distant helicopter droned somewhere behind them. Nick turned, shading his eyes. He saw the flash-flash- flash of its rotor in the morning sun over Port Canaveral.

"This way," said Candy. She crossed the highway and headed into the brush. Nick followed. The heat inside the canebrake was suffocating. Mosquitoes rose in swarms, tormenting them. The girl ignored them. Her tough, stubborn side was showing once again. They came to a drainage ditch that debouched into a wide channel which had apparently been used at one time as a canal. The ditch was choked with weeds and underwater grasses and it narrowed where the embankment had washed into the water.

She dropped her purse and kicked off her tennis Shoes. "I'm going to need both hands," she said and clambered down the slope into the knee-deep muck. She moved forward now, bent over, her hands searching for something in the muddy water.

Nick watched her from the top of the embankment. He shook his head. "What in hell are you looking for?" he grinned. The helicopter's clatter had gotten louder. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. It was headed in their direction, some three hundred feet above the ground, the light glinting on its whirling rotor blades.

"I've found it!" Candy shouted. He turned. She had moved about a hundred feet along the drainage ditch and was bent over, tugging at an object in the mud. He started toward her. The chopper sounded as if it was almost directly overhead now. He glanced up. The rotor blades had tilted, increasing its rate of descent. He could make out the white lettering on its red underside— SHARP'S FLYING SERVICE. It was one of the six helicopters that flew on half-hour schedules from the Cocoa Beach Amusement Pier to Port Canaveral, then followed the perimeter of the MILA fence, allowing tourists to snap photographs of the VAB building and launching platforms.

Whatever Candy had found, she now had it half out of the mud. "Get my purse, will you?" she called out. "I left it back there a little way. I need something in it."

The helicopter had banked away sharply. It now came circling back, no more than a hundred feet above the ground, the wind from its whirling blades flattening the scrubby bushes along the embankment. Nick found the purse. He leaned over, picked it up. The sudden silence brought his head up with a jerk. The chopper's motor had switched off. It came gliding in over the tops of the cane stalks, heading directly toward him!

He spun to his left and dived head first into the ditch. There was a gigantic, rumbling roar behind him. Heat rippled the air like watered silk. A jagged ball of flame billowed upwards, followed immediately by clouds of blackish, carbon-laden smoke that blotted out the sun.

Nick clambered back up the embankment and ran toward the wreckage. He could see the figure of a man inside the flaming Perspex canopy. His head was wrenched around, facing him. As Nick approached, he could make out his features. He was Chinese and the expression on his face was something out of a nightmare. There was a smell of roasting flesh and Nick saw that the lower half of his body was already in flames. He saw, also, why the man wasn't trying to get out. He was bound hand and foot to the seat with wires.

"Help me!" the man screamed. "Get me out of here!"

Nick's skin momentarily crawled. The voice belonged to Major Sollitz!

There was a second explosion. Nick was sent tumbling backwards by the heat. He hoped the alternate gas tank had killed Sollitz when it blew. He believed that it had. The helicopter burned to a shell, the glass fiber buckling and splitting in a machine-gun rattle of hot, exploding rivets. The flames melted the Lastotex mask and the Chinese face sagged, then began to run, revealing Major Sollitz's own features for a brief second before they, too, melted away and were replaced by a charred skull.

Candy stood a few feet away, the back of her hand pressed against her mouth, her eyes wide with horror. "What happened?" she said, her voice shaking. "It looked like he aimed directly at you."

Nick shook his head. "On automatic pilot," he said. "He was just in there as a sacrificial offering." And the Chinese mask, he thought to himself—still another false clue in case Nick survived. He turned to her. "Let's take a look at what you found."

Wordlessly she led him along the embankment to where an oilcloth package lay. "You'll need a knife," she said. She glanced back at the burning wreckage and he saw a shadow of fear in her wide-set blue eyes. "There's one in my purse."

"Won't need-it." He grasped the oilcloth in both hands and pulled. It parted like wet paper in his grip. He had a knife with him, a stiletto named Hugo, but it remained sheathed inches above his right wrist, awaiting more important tasks. "How'd you happen to come across this?" he asked.

The package contained a short-range AN/PRC-6 two-way radio set and a pair of powerful field glasses—8 x 60 AO Jupiters. "It was sticking half out of the water the other day," she said. "Look." She took the field glasses and focused them on the launching platform, which was barely visible to him. He looked through them. The powerful lenses brought the gantry so close he could see the lips of the pad crew moving as they talked to each other over their headsets. "The radio has fifty channels," she said, "and a range of about one mile. So whoever was here had confederates nearby. I think that ..."

But he was no longer listening. Confederates ... radio. Why hadn't he thought of that sooner? The automatic pilot by itself couldn't have brought the chopper so unerringly toward its target. It had to operate like a drone plane. Which meant it had to be directed electronically, attracted by something they were wearing. Or carrying. ... "Your purse!" he said, suddenly. "Come on!"

The copter's motor had shut off as he'd lifted the purse. It had still been in his hand when he'd dived into the drainage ditch. He scrambled down the embankment and felt around in the muddy water for it. It took him about a minute to locate it. He brought the purse up dripping and opened it. There, beneath lipstick, tissues, a pair of dark glasses, a package of chewing gum and a penknife, he found a twenty-ounce Talar transmitter.

It was the type used to land small planes and helicopters in zero visibility. The transmitter sent a rotating microwave beam that was registered on panel instruments connected to the automatic pilot. In this case, the landing point happened to be on top of Nick Carter. Candy stared at the tiny device in his palm. "But... what is it?" she said. "How did it get in there?"

"You tell me. Has the purse been out of your sight today?"

"No," she said. "At least I ... Wait a minute, yes!" she suddenly exclaimed. "When I phoned you this morning ... it was from a booth, in Enterprise. That grocery store we passed on the way out here. I left the purse on the counter there. When I came out of the booth, I noticed it had been moved to one side by the clerk. I didn't think anything about it at the time ..

"Come on."

This time he drove. "The pilot was tied hand and foot," he said as he sent the Giulia hurtling along the highway. "So someone else had to get that chopper off the ground. That means there was a third transmitter setup. Probably in Enterprise. Let's hope we get there before they disassemble it. My friend Hugo has questions he wants to ask."

Peterson had brought N3's protective devices with him from Washington. They'd been waiting for Nick in a false-bottom suitcase at the Gemini Inn. Hugo, the stiletto, was now up his sleeve. Wilhelmina, the stripped-down Luger, hung in a snug holster at his waist, and Pierre, the lethal gas pellet, nestled with several of his nearest relatives in a waistband pocket. AXE's top operative was dressed to kill.

The gas station-grocery store was closed. There was no sign of life inside. Nor anywhere else in Enterprise, for that matter. Nick glanced at his watch. It was only ten o'clock. "Not very enterprising," he said.

Candy shrugged. "I don't get it. They were open when I was here

at eight.” Nick walked around to the side of the building, feeling the weight of the sun on him, sweating. He sauntered past a fruit processing shed and some oil storage tanks. Upturned boats and drying nets lay along the edge of the dirt road. The ramshackle waterfront was quiet, stifled under the pall of humid heat.

Suddenly he stopped, listened, then moved quickly into the shadowed overhang of an upturned hull, Wilhelmina in hand. The footsteps were approaching at a right angle. They reached their loudest point, then began to recede. Nick peered out. Two men were moving between the boats, carrying a heavy piece of electronic equipment. They moved out of his field of vision and a moment later he heard a car door open, then slam shut. He started out from under the boat, then froze ...

They were returning. Nick melted back into the shadows. This time he got a good look at them. The one in the lead was short, thin, with a hollow, hard-eyed face that spelled hood. The shambling giant behind him had gray hair cropped short to the shape of his bullet head and a sunburned face dusted over with pale freckles.

Dexter. Pat Hammer’s next-door neighbor—who’d said he worked for the Electronic Guidance Division of Connelly Aviation.

Electronic Guidance. The drone-like helicopter. The piece of equipment the two of them had just delivered to the car. It added up.

N3 gave them a good head start, then followed, careful to keep objects between them. The two men went down a flight of steps and out along a small weatherbeaten wooden jetty that reached some twenty yards on barnacled piles into the bay. A single boat was moored to the end of it. A wide-beamed, diesel-powered shrimp trawler. Cracker Boy, Enterprise, Fla., the black lettering on its stern proclaimed. The two men climbed aboard, opened a hatch and disappeared below deck.

Nick turned. Candy was a few yards behind him. “Better wait here,” he warned her. “There may be fireworks.”

He raced out along the jetty, hoping to reach the wheelhouse before they came back on deck. But this time his luck wasn’t running. As he swung over the taffrail, Dexter’s bulky shape filled the hatchway. The big man stopped in his tracks. He had a complicated electronic component in his hands. His mouth dropped open. “Hey, I know you... .” He glanced over his shoulder, then started toward Nick. “Listen, buddy, they made me do it,” he rasped hoarsely. “They got my wife and kids...”

Something roared, driving into Dexter with pile-driver force, spinning him completely around and throwing him halfway across the deck. He finished on his knees, the component crashing off to one side, his eyes all whites, his hands claspings his guts, trying to keep

them from spilling out on the deck. Blood welled through his fingers, He folded slowly forward with a sigh.

There was another burst of orange from inside the hatchway, a chopping noise and the hollow-faced man came charging up the steps, slugs spurting wildly in all directions from the machine pistol in his hand. Wilhelmina was already out and Killmaster pumped two carefully placed bullets at him with an action so swift that the double crash sounded like a single prolonged roar. For a moment, Hollow Face stood upright, then, like a straw man, he crumpled and fell awkwardly, his legs turning to rubber beneath him.

N3 kicked the machine pistol away from his hand and knelt beside Dexter. Blood was flowing out of the big man's mouth. It was light pink and very frothy. His lips worked frantically, trying to form words. "... Miami ... goin' to blow it up ..." he gurgled indistinctly.

... kill everybody... I know ... I worked on it... stop them ... before ... too late... ." The eyes rolled back to their more important work. The face went slack.

Nick straightened up. "Okay, let's talk about that," he said to Hollow Face. His voice was calm, amiable, but the gray eyes were green, a deep sea green, and for a moment a shark swirled in their depths. Hugo came out of its hiding place. Its vicious, ice-pick blade clicked open.

Killmaster turned the gunman over with his foot, then, squatted beside him. Hugo slashed down the front of his shirt, not being too careful about the bony, sallow flesh beneath. Hollow Face flinched. His eyes went wet with pain. Hugo found a place at the base of the man's bare neck and stroked it lightly. "Now," Nick smiled. "Name, please."

The man pressed his lips together. His eyes closed. Hugo bit into the knotted neck. "Aggh!" The sound forced itself out of his throat and his shoulders bunched. "Eddie Byloff," he croaked.

"Where are you from, Eddie?"

"Vegas."

"I thought you looked familiar. You're one of the Sierra Inn boys, aren't you?" Byloff closed his eyes again. Hugo cut a slow, neat zigzag down his belly. The tiny slits and pinpricks started to ooze blood. Byloff made noises that weren't quite human. "Aren't you, Eddie?" His head jerked up and down spasmodically. "Tell me, Eddie, what are you doing here in Florida? And what did Dexter mean about blowing up Miami? Talk, Eddie—or die slowly." Hugo edged its way beneath a skin flap and started exploring.

Byloff's tortured body writhed. Blood bubbled up, mixing with the sweat that sprang from every pore. His eyes burst open. "Ask her," he gasped, staring past Nick. "She's the one that set it up... ."

Nick turned. Candy stood just behind him, smiling. Smoothly, gracefully, she raised her white miniskirt. She was naked underneath it except for the wafer-flat .22 that Was holstered to the inside of her thigh,

“Sorry about this, chief,” she smiled. The gun was in her hand now and pointed at him. Slowly her finger tightened around the trigger... .

CHAPTER 11

SHE PRESSED THE GUN against her side to cushion the recoil. “You can close your eyes if you want,” she smiled.

It was an Astra Cub, a twelve-ounce miniature with a three-inch barrel, potent at short range, and by far the flattest gun N3 had ever seen. “You pulled a shrewdy when you went to Houston masquerading as Eglund,” she said. “Sollitz wasn’t prepared for that. Neither was I. So I wasn’t able to warn him that you weren’t really Eglund. The result was he panicked and planted that bomb. With that his usefulness came to an end. Now your career, Nicholas dear, must also end. You’ve come too far, found out too much... .”

He saw her finger starting to squeeze the trigger. In the split second before the firing pin struck the cartridge, he flung himself backwards. It was an instinctive animal process—to move away from the shot, to present as small a target as possible. Sharp pain seared his left shoulder as he went tumbling over the side. But he knew he’d been successful. The pain was localized—sign of a minor flesh wound.

He took a great heaving lungful of breath as the water closed over him.

It was warm and smelled of rotting things, of vegetable scum and raw petroleum and mud that gave off foul, gaseous bubbles. As he sank slowly through it he felt an inner rage at being so easily duped by the girl. Get my purse, she’d told him as the helicopter had come zeroing in on target. And that phony oilcloth package—which she had buried herself only a few hours earlier. It was like all the other phony clues she’d planted, then led him to— first at the Bali Hai, then at Pat Hammer’s bungalow.

It had been a sensitive, elegant plan, pivoted on a razor’s edge. She had dovetailed every part of her mission with his own, assembling a setup in which N3 took his place as obediently as if he were under her direct orders. Rage was useless but he let it sweep over him anyway, knowing that it would clear the way for the cold, calculating brainwork to come.

A heavy object struck the surface above him. He glanced up. It came floating through the murky water, black smoke stringing out of its midsection. Dexter. She had dumped him overboard. A second body hit with a splash. This time Nick saw silvery bubbles as well as black strings of blood. Arms and legs moved feebly. Eddie Byloff was still alive.

Nick snaked up toward him, his chest tight from the strain of holding his breath. He had more questions for the Las Vegas hood. But

first he had to get him to a spot where he could, answer them. Thanks to Yoga, Nick had another two, perhaps three minutes of air left in his lungs. Byloff would be lucky if he had three seconds' supply left.

Above them a long metallic shape hung in the water. The keel of the Cracker Boy. The hull was an indistinct shadow spreading out to both sides above it. An extension of that shadow waited, gun in hand, peering into the water. He didn't dare surface—not even under the jetty. Byloff might cry out and she would be sure to hear it.

Then he remembered the concave space between the hull and the propeller. An air pocket could usually be found there. His arm closed around Byloff's waist. He kicked his way up through the milky turbulence left by the other man's descent until his head bumped gently against the keel.

Cautiously he felt his way along it. When he reached the big copper screw, he seized the edge of it with his free hand and pulled himself upwards. His head broke the surface. He took a deep breath, choking on the foul, oil-Stinking air trapped in place above it. Byloff was coughing and spluttering at his side. Nick struggled to keep the other man's mouth above the water line. There was no danger of their being heard. A couple of tons of wood and metal hung between them and the girl on deck. The only danger was that she might decide to start the engine. If that happened, the two of them could be sold by the pound—as ground duck.

Hugo was still in Nick's hand. It now went to work, dancing a little jig inside Byloff's wounds. "You're not finished, Eddie, not yet. Tell me all about it, everything you know ..."

The dying gangster talked. He talked without letup for almost ten minutes. And when he had finished, N3's face Was grim.

He made a knot of bone out of his middle knuckle and squeezed it into Byloff's larynx. He did not relent. He Was called Killmaster. That was his business—to kill. His knuckle was like the knot of a garrote. He saw a recognition of death in Byloff's eyes. He heard a faint, croaking plea for mercy.

He had no mercy.

It took half a minute to kill the man.

A series of meaningless vibrations flashed through the airwaves, emerging from the complex unscrambling machinery of the receiving set in Room 1209 of the Gemini Inn as Hawk's voice.

"No wonder Sweet asked me to keep an eye on his daughter," exclaimed the head of AXE. His voice was distilled acid, "There's no telling what that little fool has gotten herself into. I began to suspect that all was not as it should be when I got a report on that sketch of the Apollo life support system. The one you found in Hammer's

basement. It was a phony, traced from a diagram that ran in practically every newspaper after the accident.”

“Ouch,” said Nick—not in reaction to Hawk’s words but to Peterson’s ministrations. The man from Editing was cleaning out his shoulder wound with a swab of cotton soaked in some stinging ointment. “At any rate, sir, I’m pretty sure I know where to find her.”

“Good. I think this new approach of yours is the answer,” said Hawk. “The whole case seems to be shifting in that direction.” He paused. “We’re automated, but you’ll still have to allow a couple of hours for the records to be combed. I’ll have someone get down to you by this evening, though. Your transportation will have to be arranged locally.”

“Peterson’s already taken care of that,” replied Nick. The man from Editing was spraying something on his shoulder out of a pressurized can. The spray was freezing cold at first, but it cut through the pain and gradually numbed the shoulder like Novocain. “Trouble is, the girl’s already had a couple of hours’ head start on me,” he added sourly. “It was all very neatly arranged. We went in her car. So I had to walk back.”

“What about Dr. Sun?” said Hawk.

“Peterson fitted an electronic tracer to her car before he returned it to her this morning,” said Nick. “He’s been following her movements. They’re normal enough. She’s back at her job at the Space Center now. Frankly, I think Joy Sun is a dead end.” He didn’t add that he was glad she was.

“And this man ... what’s his name ... Byloff,” said Hawk. “He didn’t give you any further information on the threat to Miami?”

“He told me everything he knew. I’m sure of that. But he was just a minor hireling. There’s another angle to pursue, though,” Nick added. “Peterson’s going to work on it. He’ll start with the names of the dependents in that bus accident, then work back to their husbands’ occupations at the Space Center. Maybe that will give us a picture of what they have planned.”

“Good. That’s it for now then, N3,” Hawk said crisply. “I’m going to be up to my ears in this Sollitz mess for the next few days. Heads are going to roll all the way to the Joint Chiefs of Staff level for having let that man rise so high.”

“Have you gotten anything out of Eglund yet, sir?”

“Glad you reminded me. We have. Seems he caught Sollitz sabotaging the Space Environment Simulator. He was overpowered by him and locked in, and then the nitrogen was turned up.” Hawk paused. “As to the Major’s motive in sabotaging the Apollo program,” he added, “the current feeling is that he was being blackmailed. We have a team going over his security record right now. They’ve found a

number of discrepancies regarding his POW record in the Philippines. Very minor things. Never noticed before. But that's the area they're going to concentrate on, see if it leads anywhere."

Mickey "Iceman" Elgar—puffy, sallow-faced, with a brawler's flat nose—had the tough and unreliable look of a pool hall character and his clothes were flashy enough to point up the resemblance. So was his car—a red Thunderbird loaded down with tinted glass, a compass, large foam-rubber dice hanging from the rearview mirror and round, extra-large brake lights flanking a kewpie doll in the back window.

Elgar went roaring through the night on the Sunshine State Parkway, the radio tuned to a station blasting out the top forty. He wasn't listening to the music, however. A tiny, transistorized tape recorder lay on the seat beside him and a wire led up from it and into the plug in his ear.

A man's voice came through the wire, saying: "You specified a hood just out of jail who could have a lot of dough on him without looking suspicious. Elgar will fit the bill. A lot of people owe him cuts on jobs, and he's the land who collects. He's also a nut on gambling. There's just one thing to be careful about. Elgar was in pretty thick with Reno Tree and Eddie Byloff a few years back. So there may be others around the Bali Hai who know him. We have no way of knowing—nor what their attitude toward him might be."

Another voice broke in at this point—Nick Carter's: "I'll have to take my chances on that," he said. "All I want to know is, has the Elgar cover been worked out thoroughly? I don't want anyone checking back and finding out that the real Elgar is still in Atlanta."

"No chance of that," replied the first voice. "He was released this afternoon and the snatch was made an hour later by a couple of AXEmen."

"Would I have a car and money so fast?"

"It's all been carefully worked out, N3. Let me get started on your face and we'll review the material together. Ready?"

Mickey Elgar, alias Nick Carter, joined his voice to those on the tape as he drove along: "My home turf is Jacksonville, Florida. I teamed with the Menlo brothers on a couple of jobs there. They owed me money. I'm not saying what happened to them, but the car is theirs and so is the money in my pocket. I'm loaded and I'm looking for action ..."

Nick played the tape through three more times. Then, as he swung through West Palm Beach and over the Lake Worth Causeway, he detached the tiny reel with one finger, stuffed it into the ashtray and put his Ronson fighter to it. Reel and tape both flared up instantly, leaving nothing but ashes.

He parked on Ocean Boulevard and walked the last three blocks to the Bali Hai. The amplified roar of folk-rock music came faintly through the curtained windows of the discotheque. Don Lee barred his way to the restaurant. The young Hawaiian's dimples weren't showing this time. His eyes were cold and the look they gave Nick should have stuck four inches out of his back. "Side entrance, jerk," he hissed under his breath after Nick had given him the password he'd received from Eddie Byloff's dying lips.

Nick went around the building. A figure stood just inside the metal-surfaced fire door, waiting for him. Nick recognized his fiat Oriental features. It was the waiter who'd served Hawk and him that first night. Nick gave him the password. The waiter watched him, his face blank, expressionless. "I was told you know where the action is," Nick finally growled.

The waiter jerked his head over his shoulder, signaling him to enter. The door slammed shut behind them. "Straight ahead," said the waiter. They didn't go through the ladies' room this time but reached the secret passageway via a pantry-like storeroom opposite the kitchen. The waiter unlocked the reinforced steel door at the end of it and ushered Nick into the familiar, cramped little office.

This had to be the man Joy Sun had told him about, N3 figured. Johnny Hung Fat. And to judge by the crowded key ring he carried and the sure, authoritative way that he moved around the office, he was more than just another waiter at the Bali Hai.

Nick recalled the savage groin-kick that Candy had given him the night they'd been trapped here in the office by him. More play acting, he assumed.

"This way, prease," said Hung Fat. Nick followed him into the long, narrow room with the two-way mirror. The rows of cameras and tape recorders were silent. No film was inching down from the slots tonight. Nick stared through the infrared glass at the elaborately jeweled women and the men with the round, well-fed faces who sat smiling at each other across pools of soft light, their lips moving in silent conversation.

"Mrs. Burncastle," said Hung Fat, pointing to a middle-aged dowager wearing an ornate diamond pendant and sparkling chandelier earrings. "She have seven hundred fifty G's that kind jewelry at home. She going to visit her daughter in Rome next week. House will be empty. But you need safe man. We split proceeds."

Nick shook his head. "Not that kind of action," he growled. "I'm not interested in ice. I'm loaded. I'm looking for gambling. Top stakes." He watched them come into the restaurant through the bar. They'd obviously been in the discotheque. A waiter led them to a corner table set slightly apart from the others. He whisked the

reserved sign away and bent forward, all obsequiousness, to take their order.

Nick said, "I've got a hundred G's to play, an' I don't Want to violate my parole by goin' to Vegas or the Bahamas. I want action right here, in Florida."

"Hundred G's," said Hung Fat thoughtfully. "Velly big stake. I make phone call, see what I can do. You wait here, prease."

The rope burn around Reno Tree's neck had been carefully touched up with powder, but it was still visible. Particularly when he turned his head. Then it bunched up like an old sheet. His scowl, pulling a low hairline even lower, drew a sort of dramatic emphasis from his costume—black trousers, jet-black silk shirt, a spotless whits sweater with belled sleeves, a gold wristwatch the size of a grapefruit slice.

Candy couldn't seem to get enough of him. She was all over him, those wide-set blue eyes of hers eating him up, her body rubbing against his like a hungry kitten's. Nick found the number that, corresponded to their table and switched the sound system on. "... please, baby, don't go salty on me," Candy was whining. "Hit me, shout at me, but don't get cold. Please. I can take anything but that."

Reno pulled a pack of butts from his pocket, shook one out and lit it. He forced the smoke through his nostrils in a thin, hazy cloud. "I gave you a job to do," he rasped. "You screwed up."

"Baby, I did everything you asked. I can't help it that Eddie fingered me."

Reno shook his head. "You," he said. "It was you led the guy right to Eddie. That was just plain stupid." Calmly, deliberately, he ground the lit cigarette into her arm.

She sucked her breath in sharply. Tears streamed down her face. She didn't move, though, didn't strike out at him. "I know, lover. I deserved that," she moaned. "I've really let you down. Please find it in your heart to forgive me ..."

Nick's belly crawled at the repellent little scene being played out before his eyes.

"Please keep still. Very still." The voice behind him was lacking in inflection, but the gun pressed hard against his spine carried its own message, one not easily misunderstood. "Good. Take a pace forward and turn slowly around, hands extended before you."

Nick did as he was told. Johnny Hung Fat was flanked by two gorillas. Big, beefy non-Chinese gorillas, with snap-brim fedoras and fists the size of small hams. "Brace him, boys."

One snapped the cuffs on him while the other ran his hands over him professionally, flushing the Colt Cobra .38 special which—in line with Elgar's cover—was the only weapon Nick was packing. "Now, then," said Hung Fat. "Who are you? You're not Elgar, because you

didn't recognize me. Elgar knows I don't talk like Charlie Chan. Besides, I owe him money. If you were really The Iceman, you would have been slapping me around for it."

"I was going to, don't worry," Nick gritted through clenched teeth. "I just wanted to feel out the setup first. I couldn't figure the way you were acting, an' that phony accent . .

Hung Fat shook his head. "No good, friend. Elgar was always interested in an ice heist. Even when he had dough. He couldn't resist the itch. You just don't add Up." He turned to the gorillas. "Max, Teddy, a Brownsville stomping," he snapped. "Eighty percenter for openers."

Max hit Nick in the jaw and Teddy let him have it in the stomach. As he folded forward, Max brought his knee up. On the floor, he saw them shift their weight to their left legs and braced himself for the kicks that would follow. He knew it was going to be bad. They were wearing football cleats.

CHAPTER 12

HE ROLLED OVER, struggling onto hands and knees, his head hanging toward the ground like that of a stricken animal. The floor was shaking. There was a stink of hot lubricating oil in his nostrils. He knew vaguely that he was alive, but who he was, where he was, what had happened to him was temporarily beyond recall.

He opened his eyes. A shower of red pain burst through his skull. He moved his arm. The pain worsened. So he lay still, watching the sharp, reddish fragments race across his vision. He took stock. He could feel his feet and his hands. He could move his head from side to side. He could see the metallic coffin in which he lay. He could hear the steady roar of an engine.

He was in a moving object of some kind. A car trunk? No, too big, too smooth. A plane. That was it. He could feel the faint rise and fall, that sense of weightlessness that went with flight.

“Teddy, take care of our friend,” said a voice somewhere off to his right. “He’s comin’ around.”

Teddy. Max. Johnny Hung Fat. It came rushing back to him now. The Brooklyn-style stomping. An eighty percenter—the most savage kicking a man could absorb short of having his bones crushed. Rage gave him strength. He started to climb to his feet ...

A sharp pain exploded in the back of his head and he pitched forward into the darkness coming up at him from the floor.

It seemed only an instant that he was out, but it had to be longer. For as consciousness came seeping slowly back, an image at a time, he found that he was out of the metallic coffin and sitting strapped in a chair of some kind inside a large sphere of glass webbed by steel piping.

The sphere hung at least fifty feet above the ground in a huge, cavernous room. Banks of computers stood along the far wall, making soft musical noises like children’s roller toys. Men in white smocks resembling surgeons were working over them, pushing switches, loading reels of tape. Other men, wearing earphones with dangling plugs, stood looking up at Nick. The edges of the room were lined with a collection of weird-looking devices—rotating chairs reminiscent of giant kitchen blenders, tilt tables, egg-like disorientation drums revolving on multiple axes at fantastic speeds, heat chambers that looked like Steel sauna baths, exercise unicycles, Aqua-EYA simulation pools constructed of canvas and wire.

One of the white-coated figures plugged a hand-mike into the console in front of him and spoke. Nick heard his Voice, tiny and

remote, trickling into his ear. "... thank you for volunteering. The idea is to test how much vibration the human body can tolerate. High-speed whirling and tumbling on re-entry can shift the position of a man's liver a full six inches ..."

If Nick could hear the man, then maybe ... "Get me out of here!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs.

. . at zero-G, certain changes begin, to take place," the voice continued without pause. "Blood pools, vein walls soften. Bones release calcium to the blood. There are serious shifts in body fluid level, muscular weakening. It's unlikely, however, that you will reach that point."

The chair had started to slowly turn. Now it began to pick up speed. At the same time it began shaking up and down with increasing violence. "Remember that you yourself control the mechanism," the voice in his ear said. "It's the button under your left index finger. When you feel that you have reached the limit of your endurance, press it. The motion will cease. Thank you again for volunteering. Over and out."

Nick pressed the button. Nothing happened. The chair whirled faster and faster. The vibrations grew more intense. The universe splintered into a chaos of unbearable motion. His brain crumbled under the terrible onslaught. A roaring started in his ears and over it he heard another sound. His own voice, shouting in agony against the mind-destroying shaking. His finger stabbed the button again and again but there was no reaction, nothing but the roaring in his ears and the bite of the straps that were tearing his body to pieces.

His shouts turned to screams as the assault on his senses continued. He closed his eyes in torment, but it did no good. The very cells of his brain, the corpuscles of his blood, appeared to throb, to burst in a mounting crescendo of pain.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the onslaught stopped. He opened his eyes but saw no change in the red-splashed darkness. His brain pounded inside his skull, the muscles of his face and body quivered uncontrollably. Gradually, bit by bit, his senses began to recover. The scarlet flashes became crimson, then green, then vanished. The background blended with them in a growing lightness, and through the haze of his damaged sight something gleamed, pale and motionless.

It was a face.

A thin, dead face with dead gray eyes and a savage scar around its throat. The mouth moved. It said: "Is there anythin' else you want to tell us? Anythin' you've forgotten?"

Nick shook his head and there was nothing after that but the long, deep dive into blackness. He surfaced once, briefly, to feel the faint

rise and fall of a cool metal floor under him and to know that he was airborne once again; then the blackness spread across his vision like the wings of a great bird and he felt a cold, clammy rush of air against his face and knew it for what it was—death.

He awoke to a scream—a terrible, inhuman scream out of hell.

His reaction was automatic, an animal response to danger. He kicked out with his arms and legs, rolled to the left, landing on his feet in a half crouch, the fingers of his right hand closing around the gun that wasn't there.

He was naked. And alone. In a bedroom with thick white carpeting and Kelly green satin furnishings. He was facing in the direction from which the noise had come. But there was nothing there. Nothing that moved, inside or out.

Late morning sun streamed through the arched windows at the far end of the room. Outside, palmetto-fronds hung limp in the heat. Beyond them the sky was a pale, washed-out blue, and the light glinted off the sea with blinding flashes as if mirrors were being played across its surface. Cautiously, Nick inspected the bathroom and dressing room. Having made sure no danger lurked behind him, he returned to the bedroom and stood there, frowning. Everything was very quiet; then all at once the sharp, hysterical cry that had awakened him came again.

He strode across the room and looked out the window. The cage stood on the terrace below. Nick chuckled grimly. A myna bird! He watched it hop back and forth, its oily black plumage ruffling. The sight of it brought the other bird back to him. With it came the smell of death, the pain and—in a series of brilliant, razor-sharp images—everything that had happened to him. He glanced down at his body. Not a mark on it. And the pain—vanished. But he automatically cringed at the thought of further punishment.

The new look in torture, he thought grimly. Twice as effective as the old because you recovered so quickly. No aftereffect except dehydration. He unstuck his tongue from the floor of his mouth and at once the acrid taste of chloral hydrate burst through. That made him wonder how long he'd been here, and where "here" was. He sensed movement behind him and swung around, body tensed, ready to defend himself.

"Good morning, sir. Feeling better, I hope."

The butler came ploughing through the heavy white carpeting, a tray in his hand. He was young and husky, with eyes like gray pebbles, and Nick noticed the telltale bulge under his jacket. He was wearing a shoulder rig. The tray held a glass of orange juice and "Mickey Elgar's" wallet. "You dropped this last night, sir," the butler

said smoothly. "I think, you'll find that everything's there."

Nick drank the juice down greedily. "Where am I?" he demanded.

The butler didn't bat an eye. "Cathay, sir. The Palm Beach estate of Alexander Simian. You were washed ashore last night."

"Washed ashore!"

"Yes, sir. Your launch is a total wreck, I'm afraid. It ran aground on the reef." He turned to go. "I'll tell Mr. Simian that you're up. Your clothes are in the closet, sir. We've pressed them, though I'm afraid the salt water hasn't done them any good." The door closed silently behind him.

Nick opened the wallet. The one hundred crisp portraits of Grover Cleveland were still there. He opened the closet, and found himself staring into a full-length mirror on the inside of the door. Mickey Elgar was still in place. Last night's "workout" hadn't disturbed a single hair. As he looked at himself, he felt renewed admiration for Editing's lab. The new, fleshlike polyethylene silicone masks might be uncomfortable to wear but they were foolproof. No amount of tugging, scratching or smearing could remove them. Only hot water and knowhow could do that.

There was a faint salt-water smell to his suit. Nick frowned as he got dressed. Was the shipwreck story true, then? The rest a nightmare? Reno Tree's face came swimming vaguely into focus. Anythin' else you want to tell us? That was an interrogation standard. It was used on someone just coming around. The idea was to convince them that they'd already talked, that only a few points remained to be filled in. Nick wasn't going to fall for that one. He knew he hadn't talked. He'd been in the business too long; his training had been too thorough.

A voice boomed in the hallway outside. Footsteps approached. The door opened and the familiar bald eagle's head atop huge, hunched shoulders leaned in. "Well, Mr. Elgar, how do you feel?" Simian rumbled jovially. "Ready for a little poker? My associate, Mr. Tree, tells me that you like to play for high stakes."

Nick nodded. "That's right."

"Then follow me, Mr. Elgar, follow me."

Simian strode rapidly along the hall and down a sweeping staircase flanked by cast stone columns, his footsteps ringing authoritatively against the Spanish tiles. Nick followed, his eyes busy, his photographic memory registering each detail. They crossed the first floor reception area with its twenty-foot-high ceiling and moved through a series of galleries with gilded pillars. The paintings that hung on the walls were all famous ones, mostly of the Italian Renaissance school, and the uniformed GKI police spotted here and there suggested that they were originals, not prints.

They went up another staircase, through a museum-like room filled with glass cases containing coins and plaster and bronze statuettes on pedestals, and Simian, pressed the navel on a small David and Goliath. A section of wall slid silently aside and he motioned Nick to enter.

Nick did, and found himself in a damp concrete hallway. Simian stepped past him as the paneling slid shut. He opened a door.

The room was dark, filled with cigar smoke. The only light came from a single, green-shaded bulb that hung a few feet above a large round table. Three men sat at the table in their shirtsleeves. One of them glanced up. "You gonna play, for chrissake?" he growled at Simian. "Or you gonna wander all over the place?" He was a bald, thickset man with pale fish-eyes that shifted now to Nick and rested on his face a moment, as if trying to find a slot to put him in.

"Mickey Elgar, Jacksonville," said Simian. "He's going to sit in a hand."

"Not until we're finished here, friend," said fish-eyes. "You." He pointed to Nick. "Move over there and keep your trap shut."

Nick recognized him now. Irwin Spang, of the old Sierra Inn crowd, reputed to be co-director of the Syndicate, the sprawling nationwide criminal organization active at every level of business from vending machines and loan sharking to the stock market and Washington politics.

"I thought you'd be ready for a break," said Simian, sitting down and picking up his cards.

The fat man next to Spang began to laugh. It was a dry, papery laugh that caused his great, loose-hanging jowls to shake. His eyes were extraordinarily small and heavily lidded. Sweat poured down his face and he passed a screwed-up handkerchief round the inside of his collar. "We'll take a break, Alex, don't worry," he wheezed hoarsely. "Soon as we got you squeezed thy."

The voice was as familiar to Nick as his own. Fourteen days of it pleading the fifth amendment in front of a Senate Committee ten years earlier had made it as famous as Donald Duck's voice—which in a gravelly way it resembled. Sam "Bronco" Barone—the Syndicate's other director, the one known as The Enforcer.

Nick gathered saliva into his dry mouth. He had begun to think that he was safe, that the masquerade had worked. They hadn't broken him, they hadn't tumbled to the Elgar mask. He had even pictured himself walking out of this room. Now he knew it could never happen. He had seen The Enforcer, a man generally thought to be either dead or in hiding in his native Tunis. He had seen Irwin Spang in his company (a connection the Federal Government had never been able to prove), and he had seen both men in the same room with Alex Simian—a sight that made Nick the most important

witness in U.S. criminal history.

"Let's play poker," said the fourth man at the table. He was a dapper, suntanned Madison Avenue type. Nick recognized him from the Senate hearings. Dave Roscoe, a top Syndicate lawyer.

Nick watched them play. Bronco passed four hands in a row and then got three ladies. He opened, drew but didn't better it, and got out. Simian won on two pair and Bronco showed his openers. Spang stared at him. "What-sa matter, Sam?" he growled. "You don't like to win? You had Alex's doubles beat."

Bronco chuckled grimly. "Wasn't good enough for my money," he rasped. "I want a big one when I catch Alex's purse."

Simian scowled. Nick sensed the tension around the table. Spang swung around in his chair. "Hey, Red," he croaked. "Let's have some air."

Nick turned, surprised to see three other figures in the Shadowy room. One of them was a man wearing glasses and a green eye-shade. He sat at a table in the dark, an adding machine in front of him. The others were Reno Tree and Clint Sands, the head of the GKI police force. Sands stood up and pulled a switch. The blue haze began to boil up toward the ceiling, then disappeared, sucked into the maw of an exhaust vent. Reno Tree sat with his arms on the back of a chair, watching Nick, a faint smile on his lips.

Bronco let another two or three hands go by, then he saw a thousand-dollar bet and raised it the same amount. Spang and Dave Roscoe called and Simian raised a thousand. Bronco raised two G's. Dave Roscoe folded and Spang saw. Simian tipped it another G. It seemed to be what Bronco was waiting for. "Ha!" He shoved in four G's.

Spang backed out and Simian studied Bronco with glacial eyes. Bronco grinned at him. Everyone in the room started to hold their breath.

"No," said Simian grimly and tossed in his cards. "I'm not going to be suckered into that."

Bronco spread his cards up. The best he had was a ten high. The expression on Simian's face was dark and Wrathful. Bronco started to laugh.

Suddenly Nick knew what he was up to. There are three ways to play poker, and Bronco was playing the third—against the man who is the most desperate to win. He's the one who usually overplays his hand. The need to Win shuts out his luck. Get him mad and he's dead.

"What's that make it, Sydney?" wheezed Bronco, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

The man at the adding machine had switched on his light and tabulated Some figures. He tore the tapes off and handed it to Reno.

"That's twelve hundred G's less he owes you, Mr. B," said Reno.

"We're gettin' there," grated Bronco. "By the year 2000 we'll be settled."

"Okay, I'm out," said Dave Roscoe. "I've got to Stretch my legs."

"Why don't we all take a break?" said Spang. "Give Alex a chance to scrape some cash together." He nodded in Nick's direction. "You got here just in time, pal."

The three of them filed out of the room and Simian pointed to a chair. "You wanted action," he said to Nick. "Sit." Reno Tree and Red Sands advanced out of the shadows and eased themselves into chairs on either side of him. "Ten G's a chip. Any objections?" Nick shook his head. "Then deal."

Ten minutes later he was cleaned out. But the setup was clear at last. All the missing keys were there. All the answers he'd been searching for without knowing it.

There was only one problem—how to walk away with that knowledge and live. Nick decided a straight approach was best. He pushed his chair back and stood up. "Well, that's it," he said. "I'm flat. Guess I'll be going."

Simian didn't even glance up. He was too busy counting the Clevelands. "Sure," he said. "Glad you sat in. When you feel like dropping another bundle, contact me. Reno, Red, see him out."

They walked him to the door and did just that—literally.

The last thing Nick saw was Reno's arm swinging in a swift arc toward his head. There was a brief sensation of nauseating pain and then darkness.

CHAPTER 13

IT WAS THERE, waiting for him, as he slowly regained consciousness. A single thought, lighting up the interior of his brain with a sensation that was almost physical—escape. He Had to escape.

The information-gathering aspect of the assignment was over. Now it was time for action.

He lay quite still, disciplined by a training that had stamped itself even on his sleeping mind. In the darkness his senses put out feelers. They began a slow, methodical exploration. He was lying on wooden boards. It was cold, damp, drafty. The air carried a sea tang. He could hear the faint slap of water against pilings. His sixth sense told him he was in a room of some kind, that it was not very large.

He tensed his muscles gently. He wasn't tied. The lids of his eyes snapped open as sharply as camera shutters—but no eyes stared back. It was dark—nighttime. He forced himself up. Moonlight filtered palely through a window on the left. He climbed to his feet and went over to it. The frame was screwed to the molding. There were rusting bars across it. He went softly toward the door, tripped over a loose board and almost fell. The door was locked. It was solid, old-fashioned. He could try kicking it in, but he knew the noise would bring them running.

He went back and kneeled by the loose board. It was a two by six, raised about half an inch at one end. He found a broken broomstick in the darkness nearby and worked the board up further. It ran from the middle of the floor to the baseboard. His hand felt around beneath it, encountering rubble. Nothing else. Better yet, the gap beneath the floor and what appeared to be the ceiling of another room below was quite deep. Deep enough to conceal a man.

He went to work, keeping part of his mind tuned to outside noises. He had to pry up another two boards before there was room for him to slide underneath. It was a tight fit, but he made it. Then he had to work the boards down by tugging at the exposed nails. Inch by inch they descended—but they wouldn't fit flatly against the floor. He hoped that shock would preclude any close examination of the room.

As he lay there in the cramped darkness, he thought about the poker game and the desperation with which Simian had played his hand. It had been more than just a game. Each turn of the cards had been almost a matter of life and death. One of the richest men in the world—yet he'd lusted after Nick's measly hundred G's with a lust born not of greed, but of desperation. Perhaps even fear ...

Nick's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a key being

turned in the lock. He listened, muscles tense, poised for action. There was a moment's silence. Then feet scraped violently on the wooden floor. They pounded along a corridor outside and down a flight of stairs. They stumbled briefly, recovered. A door slammed somewhere below.

Nick shoved the floorboards up. He squeezed out from under them and leaped to his feet. The door hit the wall as he flung it open. Then he was at the head of the stairs, going down them with great springing leaps, three at a time, not worrying about the noise because Teddy's loud, panicky voice on the phone would cover it.

"I'm not kiddin' for chrissake, he's gone," the gorilla Was shouting into the mouthpiece. "Get some boys over here—fast." He slammed the receiver down, turned, and the bottom half of his face practically fell off. Nick lunged forward from the last step, the fingers of his right hand extended, rigid.

The gorilla's hand stabbed toward his shoulder rig—but faltered in mid-air as N3's fingers plunged into his diaphragm just below the breastbone. Teddy stood there spraddle-legged and limp-armed, sucking for oxygen, and Nick doubled his hand into a fist and hit him. He heard teeth break and the man fell over sideways and hit the floor with a thump and was still. Blood came from his mouth. Nick leaned over him, slid the Smith & Wesson Terrier from his holster and charged out the door.

He was cut off from the highway by the house and footsteps came pounding across the grounds from that direction. A shot slammed past his ear. Nick spun around. He saw the bulky shadow of the boathouse perched on the edge of the breakwater some two hundred yards away. He headed toward it, crouching low and twisting as though he were running across a battlefield.

A man stepped out the front entrance. He was in uniform and carrying a rifle. "Stop him!" a voice behind Nick shouted. The GKI guard started to raise his rifle. The S&W bucked twice in Nick's hand, roaring, and the man spun backwards, the rifle flying from his hands.

The speedboat's engine was still warm. The guard must have just returned from patrol. Nick cast off and pressed the starter button. The engine caught fire at once. He pushed the throttle wide open. The powerful boat roared out of the boathouse and across the inlet. He could see the tiny spouts rising from the calm moonlit surface ahead of him but he couldn't hear the shots.

As he approached the breakwater's narrow entrance, he eased the throttle and gave the wheel a touch to port. The maneuver carried him neatly through. Outside, he swung the wheel all the way over, which placed the breakwater's protective rocks between him and the Simian estate. Then he pushed the throttle wide open again and

headed north toward the distant, twinkling lights of Riviera Beach.

"Simian's up to his neck in this," said Nick, "and operating through Reno Tree and the Bali Hai. And there's something else. I think he's broke, and in hock to the Syndicate."

There was a brief silence and then Hawk's voice came through the shortwave speaker in Room 1209 of the Gemini Inn. "You could well be right," he said. "But with a hip-pocket operator of this type, it would take the government accountants ten years to prove it. Simian's financial empire is a labyrinthine mass of complicated transactions ..."

"Most of them worthless," Nick finished. "It's a paper empire; I'm convinced of it. The slightest push could topple it."

"That jibes with something that happened here in Washington," said Hawk thoughtfully. "Senator Kenton delivered a slashing attack on Connelly Aviation yesterday afternoon. He spoke of incessant component failures, cost estimates that have tripled and the company's do-nothing attitude about security. And he urged that NASA drop Connelly and use GKI's services on the moon program instead." Hawk paused. "Of course everyone on Capitol Hill knows that Kenton is in the GKI lobby's hip pocket, but his speech has shaken public confidence badly. Connelly stock took a sharp dip on Wall Street yesterday."

"It all figures," said Nick. "Simian wants the Apollo contract desperately. It's a matter of twenty billion dollars. That's the amount he needs, apparently, to refloat his holdings."

Hawk was silent a moment, thinking. Then he said, "There's one thing we've been able to verify. Reno Tree, Major Sollitz, Johnny Hung Fat and Simian all served in the same Japanese POW camp in the Philippines during the war. Tree and the Chinaman were mixed up in Simian's phony ramie-fiber empire, and I'm pretty sure that Sollitz turned traitor in the camp and was later protected, then blackmailed by Simian when he needed him. We still have to check on that."

"And I still have to check on Hung Fat," said Nick. "I'm praying he's a dead end, that he doesn't represent a hookup with Peking. I'll contact you as soon as I find out."

"Better hurry, N3. Time is running out," said Hawk. "Phoenix One, as you know, is scheduled to blast off in twenty-seven hours."

It took the words a few seconds to sink in. "Twenty-seven!" Nick exclaimed. "Fifty-one, isn't it?" But Hawk had already signed off.

"You've lost twenty-four hours somewhere," said Hank Peterson, who was sitting across from Nick, listening. He glanced at his watch. "It's 3:00 P.M. now. You phoned me from Riviera Beach at 2:00 A.M., telling me to pick you up. You'd been gone fifty-one hours at that time."

Those two plane trips, Nick thought, that torture session. It had

happened there. A whole day lost ...

The phone rang. He picked it up. It was Joy Sun. "Listen," Nick said, "I'm sorry I haven't called you. I've been ..."

"You're an agent of some kind," she interrupted tensely, "and I gather you're working for the U.S. Government. So there's something I've got to show you. I'm at work now—at the NASA Medical Center on Merritt Island. Can you get over here right away?"

"If you'll get clearance for me at the gate," said Nick. Dr. Sim said she would and he hung up. "Better put the radio away," he told Peterson, "and wait here for me. I won't be long."

"It's one of the guidance engineers," Dr. Sun said as she led Nick along the antiseptic corridor of the Medical Building. "He was brought in this morning, babbling incoherently about the Phoenix One being fitted with a special device that will place it under outside control the moment it's launched. Everyone here has been treating him like a lunatic, but I thought you should see him, talk to him ... just in case."

She opened a door and stood aside. Nick entered. The shades had been drawn and a nurse stood beside the bed, taking the patient's pulse. Nick looked at the man. He was in his forties, prematurely gray. There were marks on the bridge of his nose where a pair of glasses had pinched. The nurse said, "He's resting now. Dr. Dunlap gave him an injection."

Joy Sun said, "That will be all." And as the door closed behind the nurse, she muttered, "Damn," and bent over the man, forcing his eyelids open. The pupils swam in them, unfocused. "He won't be able to tell us anything now."

Nick pushed past her. "This is an emergency." He pressed his finger against a nerve in the man's temple. The pain forced his eyes open. It seemed to momentarily revive him. "What's this about the Phoenix. One's guidance system?" Nick demanded.

"My wife ..." the man muttered. "They got my ... wife and kids ... I know they'll die ... but I can't go on doing what they want me to ..."

The wife and kids again. Nick glanced around the room, saw the wall phone and quickly crossed over to it. He dialed the Gemini Inn's number. There was something Peterson had told him on the way up from Riviera Beach, something about that busload of NASA dependents that had crashed ... He'd been so busy trying to figure out Simian's financial situation that he'd only half-listened. "Room Twelve-o-nine, please." After a dozen rings the call was shifted to the desk. "Would you check Room Twelve-o-nine." said Nick. "There should be an answer." Anxiety had begun to gnaw at him. He had told Peterson to wait there.

"Is this Mr. Harmon?" The desk clerk used the name Nick had

registered under. Nick said it was. "You're looking for Mr. Pierce?" That was Peterson's cover name. Nick said he was. "I'm afraid you just missed him," said the clerk. "He left a few minutes ago with two policemen."

"Green uniforms, white crash helmets?" said Nick, his voice tense.

"That's right. The GKI force. He didn't say when he'd be back. Can I take a ... ?"

Nick slammed the receiver down. They had grabbed him.

Through Nick's own carelessness, too. He should have shifted his headquarters after the Candy Sweet angle had blown up in his face. In his haste to follow through, though, he'd forgotten to do it. She had pinpointed its location for the adversary and they had sent a mop-up team. Result: they had Peterson and maybe the radio link to AXE, too.

Joy Sun was watching him. "That was the GKI force you just described," she said. "They've been keeping close tabs on me for the last few days, following me to and from work. I was just talking to them. They want me to stop by headquarters on my way home. They said they have some questions they want to ask me. Should I go? Are they working with you on this case?"

Nick shook his head. "They're on the other side."

Alarm flickered across her features. She pointed to the man in the bed. "I told them about him," she whispered. "I couldn't get you at first, so I called them. I wanted to find out about his wife and children ..."

"And they told you that they were all right," Nick finished the sentence for her, feeling the ice suddenly run down his shoulders and into his fingertips. "They said they were at the GKI Medical Institute in Miami and therefore perfectly safe."

"Yes, that's exactly . .

"Now listen carefully," he broke in, and began to describe the large room filled with computers and space testing devices in which he had been tortured. "Have you ever seen, or been in, a place like that?"

"Yes, it's the top floor of the GKI Medical Institute," she said. "The Aerospace Research Section."

He was careful to let nothing show in his face. He didn't want the girl to panic. "You'd better come along With me," he said.

She looked surprised. "Where to?"

"Miami. I think we ought to investigate that Medical Institute. You know your way around inside. You can help me."

"Can we stop by my place first? I want to get some things."

"There's no time," he replied. They would be waiting for them there. Cocoa Beach was in the enemy's hands.

"I'll have to speak to the Project Director." She was beginning to

look doubtful. "I'm on standby duty now that the countdown has begun."

"I wouldn't do that," he said evenly. The enemy had infiltrated NASA, too. "You'll have to trust my judgment," he added, "when I say that the fate of Phoenix One depends on what we do in the next few hours."

The fate of more than the mooncraft—but he didn't want to go into that. Peterson's message had come back to him: it involved the women and children injured in that bus crash, the ones now being held hostage in the GKI Medical Center. Peterson had checked out their husbands' jobs at NASA and found that they all worked for the same division—electronic guidance control.

The heat was stifling in the closed room, but it was a Stray image that made the sweat spring suddenly to Nick's brow. An image of the three-stage Saturn 5 lifting off, then wavering slightly as outside control took over, directing its six-million-gallon payload of highly inflammable kerosene and liquid oxygen toward a new target—Miami.

CHAPTER 14

THE ATTENDANT stood by the Lamborghini's open door, waiting for a nod from the maitre d'.

He didn't get it.

Don Lee's face had a "no reservation" look on it as Nick Carter advanced from the shadows into the circle of light beneath the Bali Hai's sidewalk canopy. Nick turned, linking his arm with Joy Sun's, letting Lee get a good look at her. The maneuver had the desired effect. Lee's eyes faltered, were momentarily uncertain.

The two of them advanced on him. N3's face was his own tonight and so were the accoutrements of death he carried on his person—Wilhelmina in a snug holster at his waist, Hugo, sheathed inches above his right wrist, and Pierre, with several of his nearest relatives, nestled in a waistband pocket.

Lee glanced at the clipboard he held. "Name, sir?" It was an unnecessary piece of business. He knew perfectly well the name wasn't on his list.

"Harmon," said Nick. "Sam Harmon."

The answer came instantly. "I don't believe I see ..." Hugo snaked out of his hiding place, the tip of his vicious ice-pick blade probing Lee's belly. "Ah, yes, here it is," gasped the maitre d', struggling to suppress the quaver in his voice. "Mr. and Mrs. Harmon." The attendant slid behind the wheel of the Lamborghini and swung it around into the parking lot.

"Let's go to your office," rasped Nick.

"This way, sir." He led them through the foyer, past the coatroom, snapping his fingers at the assistant captain. "Lundy, take over the door."

As they moved down along the leopard-striped banquettes, Nick murmured in Lee's ear, "I know about the two-way mirrors, friend, so don't try anything. Act natural—like you're showing us to a table."

The office was all the way to the rear, near the service entrance. Lee unlocked the door and stood aside. Nick shook his head. "You first." The maitre d' shrugged and went in, and they followed. Nick's eyes swept the room, looking for other entrances, anything suspicious or potentially dangerous.

It was the "show" office, the one where the Bali Hai's legitimate business was conducted. There was a white broadloom carpet on the floor, a black leather sofa, a kidney-shaped desk with a Calder mobile hanging above it and a free-form glass coffee table in front of the sofa.

Nick locked the door behind him and leaned against it. His eyes

moved back to the sofa. Joy Sun's eyes followed his and she blushed. It was a celebrity sofa, having played a supporting role in a now famous pornographic photo.

"What do you want?" demanded Don Lee. "Money?"

Nick crossed the room like a swift, chill wind. Before Lee could move, Nick delivered a quick left scythe-like blow to his throat with the edge of his hand. As Lee doubled up, he added two hard hooks—a left and a right—to his solar plexus. The Hawaiian fell forward and Nick brought up his knee. The man dropped like a sack of shale. "Now then," said Nick. "It's answers I want and time is running out." He dragged Lee over to the sofa. "Let's assume I know all about Johnny Hung Fat, Reno Tree, and the operation you're running here. Let's start from there."

Lee shook his head, trying to clear it. Blood made dark wriggling lines down his chin. "I built this place up from nothing," he said dully. "I slaved day and night, sank every nickel I had into it. Finally I achieved what I was after—and then I lost it." His face twisted. "Gambling. I've always been a sucker for it. I got into debt. I had to bring other people in."

"The Syndicate?"

Lee nodded. "They let me stay on as nominal owner, but it's their operation. Completely. I've got no say in it. You've seen what they've done to the place."

"In that secret office in back," said Nick, "I found microdots and photographic equipment that pointed to a connection with Red China. Is there anything to it?"

Lee shook his head. "That's, just some game they're playing. I don't know why—they don't tell me anything."

"What about Hung Fat? Any possibility he could be a Red agent?"

Lee laughed, then cradled his jaw in sudden pain. "Johnny's strictly a capitalist," he said. "He's a swindler, a confidence man. His specialty is Chiang Kai-shek's treasure. He must have sold five million maps to it in every big-city Chinatown."

"I want to talk to him," said Nick. "Call him back here."

"I'm already here, Mr. Carter."

Nick spun around. The flat, Oriental face was impassive, almost bored. One hand was over Joy Sun's mouth, the other one held a switchblade. The tip rested against her carotid artery. The slightest movement would send it slicing into her. "Of course we bugged Don Lee's office, too." Hung Fat's mouth smiled. "You know how wily we Orientals can be."

Reno Tree stood behind him. What had appeared to be a solid wall now had a door in it. The dark, wolf-faced gangster turned, closing it behind him. The door sat so flush with the wall that no line or break

in the wallpaper could be seen from more than a foot away. Down at the baseboard, however, the joining wasn't quite so perfect. Nick cursed himself for not having noticed the thin vertical line in the baseboard's white paint.

Reno Tree slowly advanced toward Nick, his eyes boring auger holes through him. "You move, we kill her," he said simply. He took a twelve-inch length of soft, pliable wire from his pocket and tossed it on the floor in front of Nick. "Pick It up," he said. "Slowly. Good. Now turn around, hands behind you. Make the thumb-tie."

Slowly Nick turned, knowing that the first hint of a false move would send the switchblade plunging into Joy Sun's throat. Behind his back, his fingers gave a twist to the wire, making a small double-bow, and waited.

Reno Tree was good. The perfect killer: the brain and sinews of a cat, the heart of a machine. He knew all the tricks of the game. Getting the victim to tie himself up, for instance. It left the gunman free, out of reach, and it kept the victim busy, off guard. It was going to be tough to get the better of this man.

"Lie on the sofa, face down," Reno Tree said flatly. Nick moved across to it and lay down, hope beginning to fade. He knew what was coming next. "The legs," said Tree. With this tie-up you could bind a man with six inches of string. It would hold him more securely than chains and handcuffs.

He bent his knees and lifted his foot, resting it in the crotch formed by the bent knee of the other leg, all the time trying to figure a way out. There was none. Tree moved in behind him, gripping his raised foot with lightning speed, forcing it down hard so that it trapped the other foot behind the back of the calf and the thigh. With his other hand, he lifted Nick's wrists, hooking them over the instep of the raised foot. Then he released the pressure on that foot and it sprang up against the thumb-tie, so that Nick's arms and legs were painfully, hopelessly locked.

Reno Tree laughed. "Don't worry about the wire, friend. The sharks will cut right through it."

"They need incentive, Reno." It was Hung Fat who said it. "A little blood, know what I mean?"

"How's this for starters?"

The blow seemed to crush Nick's skull. As he tumbled warmly into unconsciousness, he felt the blood flowing through his nasal tubes, choking him with its warm, salty, metallic taste. He tried to hold it back, to stem its flow by sheer willpower, but of course he couldn't. It came out his nose, his mouth, even his ears. This time he was done for, and he knew it.

At first he thought he was in the water, swimming. Deep water. Way out. The ocean has a swell to it, a body that the swimmer can actually feel. You rise and fall with it as you do with a woman. The motion soothes you, rests you, untangles all the knots.

That's the way he was feeling now—except that the pain in his loins was growing unbearable. And it had nothing to do with swimming.

His eyes burst open. He was no longer lying face down on the sofa. He was on his back. The room was dark. His hands were still looped together by the thumbs. He could feel them, aching, beneath him. His legs were free, though. He moved them apart. Something still held them prisoner. Two things, actually. His pants, which were down around his ankles, and something warm and soft and excruciatingly pleasurable around his midsection.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he could see the silhouette of a female body moving expertly and wantonly above him, the hair swinging freely with each sinuous movement of the fluid hips and sharp-pointed breasts. The perfume that hung in the air was Candy Sweet's and the panting, whispered words that goaded his passion were, too.

It made no sense. He willed himself to stop, to somehow throw her aside. But he couldn't. He was already too far gone. Systematically, and with deliberate violence, he pistoned his body into hers, losing himself in the savage, loveless act of passion.

At the final movement, her nails dragged deeply across his chest. She threw herself across him, her mouth burying itself in his neck. He felt her sharp little teeth nip briefly, unendurably into him. And when she drew away, a thin trickle of blood splattered his face and chest.

"Oh, Nicholas baby, I wish it could have been different," she moaned, her breath hot and ragged in his ear. "You can't know how I felt that day after I thought I'd killed you."

"Irritable?"

"Go ahead and laugh, sweetheart. But it" could have been so marvelous between us. .You know," she added suddenly, "I never had anything personal against you. It's just that I'm hopelessly hung on Reno. It's not sex, it's ... I can't tell you, but I'll do anything he asks if it means I can stay with him."

"There's nothing like loyalty," said Nick. He sent his spy's sixth sense out to probe the room and its environs. It told him they were alone. The distant music was gone. And the usual restaurant sounds, too. The Bali Hai was closed for the night. "What are you doing here?" he asked, wondering suddenly if this might not be another of Reno's cruel jokes.

"I came looking for Don Lee," she said. "He's over there." She

gestured toward the desk. "Throat slashed from ear to ear. That's Reno's specialty—the razor. I guess they had no more use for him."

"It was Reno who killed Pat Hammer's family, too, wasn't it? That was a razor job."

"Yes, my man did that. But Johnny Hung Fat and Red Sands were there to help."

Anxiety suddenly twisted Nick's stomach. "What about Joy Sun?" he asked. "Where is she?"

Candy moved away from him, "She's all right," she said, her voice suddenly cold. "I'll get you a towel. You're covered with blood."

When she returned, she was all softness once again. She washed his face and his chest and threw the towel aside. But she didn't stop. Her hands moved rhythmically, hypnotically over his body. "I'm going to prove what I said," she whispered softly. "I'm going to let you go. A man as beautiful as you shouldn't die—at least not the way Reno's got planned for you." She shivered. "Swing over onto your stomach." He did, and she loosened the wire loops around his thumbs.

Nick sat up. "Where is he?" he asked as he pulled them the rest of the way off.

"There's some land of meeting at Simian's house tonight," she said. "They're all there."

"There's nobody outside?"

"Just a couple of those GKI cops," she replied. "Well, they call them cops, but Red Sands and Reno drafted them out of the Syndicate ranks. They're just hoods and not the brightest variety at that."

"And Joy Sun?" he persisted. She said nothing.

"Where is she?" he demanded sharply. "Are you keeping something from me?"

"What's the use?" she said dully. "It's like trying to change the direction water flows." She walked over and switched the light on. "Through there," she said. Nick crossed to the concealed door, glancing briefly at Don Lee's body lying in a halo of congealed blood under the desk.

"Where's this lead?"

"To the parking lot out in back," she said. "Also to that room with the two-way glass. She's in the office next to it."

He found her lying wedged between the wall and a couple of files, bound hand and foot with telephone cord. Her eyes were closed and the acrid smell of chloral hydrate clung to her. He felt her pulse. It was erratic. Her skin was hot and dry to the touch. An old-fashioned Mickey Finn—crude, but effective.

He untied her and slapped her face, but she only muttered something indistinct and turned over. "You'd better concentrate on getting her to the car," Candy said behind him. "I'll take care of the

two guards. Wait here.”

She was gone about five minutes. When she returned she was out of breath, and her blouse was stained with blood. “I had to kill them,” she panted. “They recognized me.” She raised her miniskirt and slipped the wafer-flat .22 into her thigh holster. “Don’t worry about noise. Their bodies muffled the shots.” She lifted her hands and drew back her hair, shutting her eyes for a second to blot out the scene. “Kiss me,” she said. “Then hit me—hard.”

He kissed her, but he said, “Don’t be a fool, Candy. Come with us.”

“No, it’s no good,” she smiled brokenly. “I need what Reno’s got to give me.”

Nick pointed to the cigarette burn on her arm. “That?”

She nodded. “That’s the kind of girl I am—the human ashtray. Anyway, I’ve tried running away before. I always come back. So just hit me good and hard, knock me out. That way I’ll have an alibi.”

He hit her the way she’d asked to be hit, pulling the punch only slightly. His knuckles cracked on the point of her rigid jaw and she fell, arms flailing, to crash the full length of the office. He walked over and looked down at her. Her face was in repose now, calm like that of a sleeping child, and there was a shadow of a smile around her mouth. She was contented. At last.

CHAPTER 15

THE LAMBORGHINI glided silently between the high-rent buildings on North Miami Avenue. It was 4:00 A.M. The major intersections were quiet, with few moving cars and only an occasional pedestrian.

Nick glanced at Joy Sun. She sat deep in the red-leather bucket seat, her head back on the folded tonneau, eyes closed. The wind made persistent little snatches at her ebony-black hair. She had stirred only once on the trip south from Palm Beach—outside Fort Lauderdale—to murmur, “What time is it?”

It would be another two or three hours before she could be relied on to function normally. Until then Nick had to find some place to park her while he reconnoitered the GKI Medical Center.

He turned west on Flagler, passing the Dade County Courthouse, then north on N.W. Seventh toward the string of fleabag motel apartments surrounding the Seaboard Railroad Terminal. A jiffy “convenience” hotel was about the only place where he could hope to get an unconscious girl past the front desk at four in the morning.

He worked the side streets around the Terminal, back and forth, until he found a likely looking one—the Rex Apartments, bedding changed ten times nightly to judge from the couple who came out together but walked off in opposite directions without a backward glance.

Above the hutch marked “Office,” a single ragged palm tree leaned against the light. Nick opened the screen door and walked in. “I got my girl outside,” he told the sullen-faced Cuban behind the counter. “She’s had too much to drink. Okay if she sleeps it off here?”

The Cuban barely glanced up from the girlie magazine he was studying. “You dumpin’ her or stayin’?”

“I’ll be here,” Nick said. It would look less suspicious if he made a show of staying.

“That’s twenty.” The man extended his hand, palm up. “In advance. And on your way in, stop here. I want to make sure it’s no stiff you got with you.”

Nick returned with Joy Sun in his arms and this time the desk clerk’s eyes swiveled up. They touched the girl’s face, then Nick’s, and suddenly the pupils were very bright. His breath made a soft hissing sound. He dropped the girlie magazine and stood up, reaching across the counter to squeeze the smooth, soft flesh of her forearm.

Nick slapped his hand away. “Look, but don’t touch,” he warned.

“I only want to see she’s alive,” he growled. He tossed the key

across the counter. "Two-o-five. Second floor, end of the hall."

The room's bare concrete walls were painted the same unnatural green as the outside of the building. Through a crack in the drawn blind, light slashed at the hollow bed, the threadbare carpet. Nick put Joy Sun down on the bed and went back to the door and locked it. Then he crossed to the window and pulled the blind aside. The room fronted on a short alleyway. The light came from a bulb hanging over a sign on the building opposite that read: REX RESIDENTS ONLY—FREE PARKING.

He slid the window open and leaned out. It was no more than twelve feet to the ground and there were plenty of crevices he could get a toe hold in on the way back. He took a last look at the girl, then swung himself out onto the ledge and dropped silently, catlike, to the concrete below. He landed on his hands and feet, going down to his knees, then getting up again and moving forward, a shadow among other shadows.

Seconds later he was behind the wheel of the Lamborghini, speeding through the shiny gas-station-cluttered glitter of predawn Greater Miami, heading down N.W. Twentieth to Biscayne Boulevard.

The GKI Medical Center was a huge, pretentious glass cliff that reflected the smaller buildings of the downtown business district as though they were trapped inside it. A sprawling free-form sculpture of wrought iron stood out in front. Foot-high letters, stenciled out of solid steel, stretched across the front of the building, spelling out the message: DEDICATED TO THE HEALING ARTS-ALEXANDER SIMIAN, 1966.

Nick sped past it on Biscayne Boulevard, one eye on the building itself, the other on its various entrances. The main one was dark, guarded by two green-uniformed figures. The emergency entrance was on the Twenty-first Street side. It was brilliantly lit and an ambulance was parked out in front. A green-uniformed policeman stood under the steel canopy, talking to its crew.

Nick swung south on N.E. Second Avenue. An ambulance, he thought. That must have been how he'd been brought there from the airport. That was one of the advantages of owning a hospital. It was your own private world, immune to outside interference. You could do just about anything inside a hospital and still have no questions asked. The most terrible tortures could be inflicted in the name of "medical research." Your enemies could be placed in straitjackets and be locked away in the psychiatric ward for their own protection. You could even kill—doctors were always losing patients in the operating theatre. No one thought twice about it.

A black GKI patrol car swung into Nick's driving mirror. He slowed and put on the right-turn indicator. The patrol car overtook him and

the crew raked him with a long, hard glance as he turned off into Twentieth Street. From the corner of his eye Nick caught a glimpse of 'heir bumper sticker: Your safety; our business. He chuckled, and the chuckle turned into a shiver in the damp, predawn air.

There were other advantages to owning a hospital. The Senate Committee had touched on a couple while investigating Simian's affairs. If you watched the tax angles and played things just right, owning a hospital allowed you to extract a maximum amount of cash from an operation with a minimum tax liability. It also provided you with a place where you could meet with top underworld figures in complete privacy. At the same time it provided status and allowed a man like Simian to step up another rung on the ladder of social acceptability.

Nick spent ten minutes in the growing traffic of the downtown business district with both eyes on the mirror, jabbing the Lamborghini heel-and-toe around the corners to shake off any possible tags. Then he circled cautiously back toward the Medical Center and parked at a point on Biscayne Boulevard from which he had a good vantage point of the building's main, emergency and clinic entrances. He rolled up all the windows, slid down in the seat and proceeded to wait.

At ten to six the day shift arrived. A steady flow of hospital workers, nurses and doctors entered the building and, minutes later, the night shift came streaming out, heading for the parking lot and nearby bus stops. At seven A.M. the three GKI guards were changed. But that wasn't what claimed Nick's attention.

Subtly, unmistakably, the presence of another, more dangerous, line of defense had registered itself on N3's delicately tuned sixth sense. Unmarked cars with plainclothes crews had been slowly circling the area. Others were parked in side streets. A third line of defense watched from the windows of nearby buildings. The place was a heavily guarded fortress.

Nick switched on the motor, put the Lamborghini into gear and eased his way out into the first lane of traffic, his eyes on, the mirror. A duotone Chevrolet pulled out a dozen cars behind him. Nick began square turns, block after block, playing the lights on amber and using his speed through Bay Front Park. The duotone Chevy disappeared, and Nick made a bee-line for the Rex Hotel.

He glanced at his watch as he stretched his flexible, Yoga-trained body toward the first of the hand-and-toe holds in the alleyway. Seven-thirty. Joy Sun had had five and a half hours to recuperate. A cup of coffee and she should be ready to go to work. To help him find a way into the impenetrable Medical Center.

He crouched on the window ledge and peered through a raised slat

in the blind. The light was on near the bed, he saw, and the girl was now under the covers. She must have gotten cold, pulled them up over her. He pushed the blind aside and slid into the room. "Joy," he said quietly.

"Time to get going. How do you feel?" She was almost invisible under the bedding. Only one hand showed.

He crossed over to the bed. The hand—palm up, fingers clenched—was holding something that looked like a dark red thread. He bent over it, taking a closer look. It was a dribble of dried blood.

Slowly he drew back the covers.

Lying there, very horribly dead, was the face and figure that had so recently clung to him in naked passion, covering his face and body with kisses. In the bed, come out of the predawn darkness, was the body of Candy Sweet.

The lovely wide-set blue eyes bulged now like glass marbles. The tongue that had so eagerly sought out his own protruded through blue, grimacing lips. The trim, full-figured body was smeared over with dried blood and scored by dozens of dark, savage razor slashes;

He felt a taste of acid in the back of his throat. His stomach lurched and heaved. He-swallowed, trying to choke back the sickness that welled up in his throat. At moments like this Nick wanted to be out of the game for good, retired, a gentleman farmer in Maryland. But even as he thought it, his mind was moving with computer-like speed. They had Joy Sun now. That meant ...

He swung away from the bed. Too late. Johnny Hung Fat and Reno Tree were standing in the open doorway, smiling. Their guns had sausage-shaped silencers on them. "She's waiting for you at the Medical Center," said Hung Fat. "We all are."

CHAPTER 16

RENO TREE'S cruel, wolf-shaped mouth said, "You seem to want to get into the Medical Center pretty bad, friend. So here's your chance."

Nick was out in the hall now, being hustled along in their strong, compelling grip. He was still in a state of shock. No strength, no will. The Cuban desk clerk danced along in front of them, saying the same thing over and over. "You tell Bronco how I helped, huh? You tell him please, hokay?"

"Yeah, friend, sure. We'll tell him."

"Funny, isn't it?" Hung Fat said to Nick. "Here we thought we'd lost you for good, thanks to that bitch Candy ..."

"Then whataya know?" chuckled Reno Tree on the other side of him. "You check right into a Syndicate hotel, an' with the word already out to report a guy in a Lamborghini with a pretty Chinese doll. Now that's what I call cooperation ..."

They were on the sidewalk now. A slow-moving Lincoln sedan came toward them. The chauffeur leaned out, holding up the phone that rested on the car dashboard. "Simian," he said. "He wants to know where the hell you guys are. We're runnin' late."

Nick was hustled into it. It was a seven-seater executive-style transport, flat-sided, massive in black and steel fittings, with leopard-skin seats. A small TV screen nestled above the glass barrier separating the chauffeur from the other occupants. Simian's face loomed out of it. "Finally," his voice crackled over the intercom. "It's about time. Welcome aboard, Mr. Carter." Closed-circuit TV. Two-way reception. Pretty smooth. The bald eagle's head turned to Reno Tree. "Come straight here," he snapped. "You're cutting it too close. The count is already at T-minus-two-seventeen." The screen went dark.

Tree leaned forward, switching on the intercom. "The Med Center. Step on it."

The Lincoln pulled smoothly, silently away from the curb, joining the fast moving morning traffic on N.W. Seventh. Nick was cold and deadly calm now. The shock had worn off. The reminder that Phoenix One was due to blast off in only two hours and seventeen minutes brought his nerves to optimum, humming pitch.

He waited until they were turning, then took a deep breath and kicked hard at the front seat, jackknifing himself back out of Hung Fat's gun range as he brought his right hand down in a strong chop on Reno Tree's wrist. He felt the bones shatter beneath the . impact. The gunman screamed with pain. But he was fast and still deadly. The gun

was in his other hand already and covering him once again. "Chloroform, for chrissake," wailed Tree, hugging the injured member against his midsection.

Nick felt a wet cloth slapped across his nose and mouth. He could see Hung Fat hovering above it. His face was the size of a house and the features were beginning to swim in a weird way. Nick wanted to hit it but he couldn't move very well. "That was foolish," said Hung Fat. At least Nick thought it was the Chinaman who said it. But it might have been Nick himself.

A black tide of panic swept over him. Why was it dark?

He tried to sit up, but was jerked backwards by a rope knotted tightly around his neck. He could hear his watch ticking on his wrist, but his wrist was tied to something behind his back. He twisted around, trying to see it. It took a few minutes but he finally caught a glimpse of the phosphorescent numbers on the dial. Three minutes past ten.

Morning or night? If morning, there were only seventeen minutes left. If night—it was all over. His head jerked from side to side, trying to find a clue in the infinite starry darkness that surrounded him.

He wasn't outdoors, couldn't be. The air was cool, neutral-smelling. He was in a vast room of some kind. He opened his mouth and shouted at the top of his lungs. His voice rebounded from a dozen corners, breaking up into a confused jumble of echoes. Breathing easier, he looked around once again. Maybe there was daylight beyond this night. What he'd first thought were stars seemed to be the vinking lights of hundreds of dials. He was in a control center of some kind ...

Without warning a bright flare of light snapped open like the burst of a bomb. A voice—Simian's voice, flat, uninterested—said, "You called, Mr. Carter? How do you feel? Are you receiving me all right?"

Nick turned his head toward the voice. His eyes were dazzled by the light. He squeezed them hard, then opened them again. The big, bald eagle's head filled a vast screen at the far end of the room. Nick caught a glimpse of leopard-skin upholstery as Simian leaned forward, adjusting the controls. He saw a blurred stream of objects moving past the man's left shoulder. He was in the Lincoln, traveling some place.

But the main thing Nick saw was light. It bloomed behind Simian's ugly head in all its glory! Nick wanted to shout his relief at the reprieve of time. But all he said was, "Where am I, Simian?"

The huge face smiled. "On the top floor of the Medical Center, Mr. Carter. In the RODRIC Room. That stands for Rocket Directional Guidance Control."

"I know what it stands for," snapped Nick. "Why am I still alive? What's the name of the game?"

“No game, Mr. Carter. The games are over. Now we’re in deadly earnest. You are still alive because I find you a worthy opponent. One who could truly appreciate the finer points of my master plan.”

Killing wasn’t enough. Simian’s monstrous vanity had to be stroked first. “I don’t make a very good captive audience,” Nick rasped. “I bore easily. Besides, you’re more interesting than any plan you could cook up, Simian. Let me tell you a few things about yourself. You can correct me if I’m wrong... .” He was talking rapidly, loudly, trying to keep Simian from noticing his shoulder movements. His effort to see his watch earlier had loosened the knots that held his right arm and he was now working desperately at them. “You’re bankrupt, Simian. GKI Industries. is a paper empire. You’ve swindled your .stockholders of millions. And now you’re in debt to the Syndicate because of your insatiable lust for gambling. They agreed to help you win the moon contract. They knew it was the only chance they had of getting their money back.”

Simian smiled thinly. “Correct up to a point,” he said. “But it’s not just gambling debts, Mr. Carter. I’m afraid the Syndicate’s back is against the wall.”

A second head moved into the picture. It was Reno Tree, in ugly closeup. “What our friend here means,” he rasped, “is that he took the Syndicate to the cleaners with one of his boiler plate operations on Wall Street. The mob kept sinkin’ more dough into it, tryin’ to get their original investment out. But the more they put in, the worse, it got. They lost millions.”

Simian nodded. “Quite true. So you see,” he added, “the Syndicate will pocket the lion’s share of any profit I make from this little enterprise. It’s unfortunate, because all the original spadework, all the brainwork was mine. The sabotage campaign to discredit Connelly Aviation, the Apollo disaster, even beefing up the original GKI police force with Syndicate hoods—all my ideas.”

“But why destroy Phoenix One?” demanded Nick. The flesh around his wrist was raw and the pain from his effort to loosen the knots sent shock waves of agony up his arms. He gasped—and, to cover it, said quickly, “The contract is practically GKI’s anyway. Why kill three more astronauts?”

“To begin with, Mr. Carter, there’s the question of the second capsule.” Simian said it with the bored, slightly impatient air of a corporation head explaining a point to some troublesome stockholder. “It must be destroyed. But why—you will undoubtedly ask—at the expense of human life? Because, Mr. Carter, GKI’s factories need at least two years to regear for the moon project. As things stand now, that’s the strongest argument NASA has for sticking with Connelly. But public revulsion at the massacre to come, you see, will demand a

delay of at least two years... .”

“Massacre?” His belly crawled with the knowledge of what Simian meant. Three men dying was not a massacre; a city exploding in flames was. “You mean Miami?”

“Please understand, Mr. Carter. This is not just a wanton act of destruction. It serves a twofold purpose—turns public opinion against the moon program and also destroys the original evidence.” Nick looked blank. “The evidence, Mr. Carter. In the room you occupy. The complicated directional tracking equipment. We can’t have that lying around afterwards, can we?”

Nick shivered slightly at the chill he felt creeping up his spine. “There’s also the tax angle,” he rasped. “You Stand to make a tidy profit from the destruction of your own Medical Center.”

Simian beamed. “Of course. Two birds hit’ with one rocket, so to speak. But in a world gone mad, Mr. Carter, self-interest approaches the level of a sacrament.” He glanced at his watch, the chairman of the board once again winding up an inconclusive stockholders’ meeting. “And now, I must bid you adieu.”

“Answer me one more thing!” Nick shouted. He could make the line slip a little now. He held his breath and made a single effort, wrenching at the ropes. The skin tore at the back, of his hand and blood oozed warmly over his fingers. “I’m not alone here, am I?”

“That would look like we had been forewarned, wouldn’t it?” smiled Simian. “No, of course not. The hospital is fully staffed and has the usual complement of patients.”

“And I’m sure your heart bleeds for us all!” He began, to shake with helpless rage. “All the way to the bank!” He bit the words off, spitting them up at the screen. The line slipped more easily because of the blood. He struggled with it, trying to force it over his knuckles.

“Your anger is pointiess,” shrugged Simian. “The equipment is automated, it’s already been programmed. Nothing that you or I say can change things now. The moment the Phoenix One lifts off the launching pad at Cape Kennedy, the automatic guidance equipment in the Medical Center will take over. The spacecraft will seem to go out of control. Its auto-destruct mechanism will jam. It will come hurtling down into the hospital, spewing its millions of gallons of volatile fuel over central Miami.

The Medical Center will simply melt, and with it, all the incriminating evidence. What a terrible tragedy, everyone will say. And two years hence, when the moon project finally gets under way again, NASA will award the contract to GKI. It’s as simple as that, Mr. Carter.” Simian leaned forward and Nick caught a glimpse of coconut palms blurring past his left shoulder. “And now goodbye. I’m switching you over to the program already in progress.”

The screen went dark for an instant, then shimmered slowly back to life. The huge Saturn rocket filled it from top to bottom. The spidery arm of the gantry had already folded to one side. A wisp of steam rose from the nose cone. A series of superimposed numbers flowed past at the foot of the screen, recording elapsed time.

There were only four minutes and thirty-two seconds left.

The blood from his torn skin had clotted on the line, and his first efforts tore the clots loose. He gasped at the pain. "This is Mission Control," a voice drawled on the screen. "How's it look to you, Gord?"

"Everything's A-OK from here," a second voice replied. "We're go for P equals one."

"That was Flight Commander Gordon Nash replying to a question from Mission Control, Houston," the announcer's voice cut in. "The count is now three minutes, forty-eight seconds to lift off, with all systems go... ."

Sweating, he felt fresh blood ooze from the back of his hands. The rope slid easily over the lubrication it provided. On the fourth try he was able to work it over one knuckle and the widest part of his twisted palm-.

And then suddenly his hand was free.

"T minus two minutes, fifty-six seconds," the voice announced. Nick closed his ears to it. His fingers were stiff, hampered by pain. He tore at the stubborn cord with his teeth.

Seconds later both hands were free. He loosened the rope around his neck, pulled it up over his head and went to work on his ankles, fingers shaking with strain , . .

"In exactly two minutes, the Apollo spacecraft, renamed Phoenix One ..."

He was on his feet now, moving stiffly toward the door that he saw illuminated in the spillover from the screen. It wasn't locked. Why would it be? And there were no guards outside. Why would there be? They were all gone, rats who'd deserted the doomed ship.

He hurried along the deserted hall, surprised to find Hugo, Wilhelmina, Pierre and family all in place on his person. But then again, why not? What defense would they be against the holocaust to come?

He tried the stairwell first, but it was locked, then the elevators—but the buttons had been removed. The top floor was sealed off. He hurried back along the hall, trying doors. They opened into empty, deserted rooms. All except one, which was locked. Three hard raps with his heel tore the metal loose from the wood and the door flew back.

It was a control center of some kind. The walls were lined with TV monitors. One of them was on. It showed the Phoenix One on the

launching pad, poised for takeoff. Nick swung around, looking for a telephone. There was none, so he began switching the remaining monitors on. Various wards and corridors of the Medical Center shimmered into view. They were crowded with patients. Nurses and doctors could be seen moving along the hallways. He twisted the sound volume up and reached for a mike, hoping that his voice would reach them, warn them in time ...

Suddenly he stopped. Something had caught his eye.

The monitors clustered around the one that showed the rocket on its launch pad—they were recording various views of the Cape Kennedy Moon Port, and one of those views, Nick knew, was not open to regular TV cameras! The one showing the top secret interior of the Launch Control Blockhouse.

He plugged the mike jack into the corresponding number on the console. “Hello!” he yelled. “Hello! Do you receive me? Launch Control Blockhouse, this is the GKI Medical Center. Do you receive me?”

He realized what had happened. Simian had gotten some of his directional engineers to build a secret two-way link with the Cape for use in emergencies.

A shadow moved across the screen. An incredulous voice barked: “What the hell’s going on here?” A face blurred into closeup focus—a grim, lantern-jawed military face. “Who authorized this linkup? Who are you?”

Nick said: “I’ve got to get through to General McAlester—without delay.”

“You’ll get through all right,” the military type rasped as he snatched up a telephone, “right through to J. Edgar Hoover. Gratz here, Security,” he barked into the receiver. “Hold the count. There’s something screwy going on. And get McAlester over here—on the double.”

Nick gathered saliva back into his dry mouth. Slowly he began to breathe again.

He sent the Lamborghini hurtling along palm-lined Ocean Avenue. The sun shone brightly out of a cloudless sky. The homes of the wealthy swung past behind their discreet hedges and wrought-iron fences.

He looked like a handsome, carefree playboy out for a mid-afternoon spin, but agent N3’s thoughts were steeped in vengeance and destruction.

The car radio was on. A voice was saying, “... a pinhole leak in the Saturn propellant tank has caused an indefinite delay. We understand they’re working on it now. If the repair work takes the Phoenix One

past the 3:00 P.M. launch deadline, the mission will be scrubbed for twenty-four hours. Stay tuned to WQXT Radio for further developments ...”

That was the story that he and McAlester had decided on. It would keep Simian and his crowd from getting suspicious. At the same time it would keep them nervous, on the edge of their chairs, their eyes pinned to the TV set Until Nick could reach them.

He knew they were in Palm Beach—at Cathay, Simian’s seaside villa. He’d recognized those coconut palms fanning past the financier’s shoulder as he’d leaned forward in the Lincoln to adjust the closed-circuit TV controls. They were the palms that lined his private driveway.

N3 hoped he would be able to beat the special AXB mop-up crew to the scene. He had a personal score to settle.

He glanced at his watch. He’d left Miami an hour ago. A planeload of guidance control engineers were now winging their way south from Cape Kennedy. They would have exactly forty-five minutes to disengage the complicated electronic nightmare that Simian had constructed. If it took longer than that, the mission would be scrubbed until tomorrow. But then what was a twenty-four hour delay compared to the flaming destruction of a city?

Another plane, a small, private one, was on its way north at this moment, and Nick’s best wishes—as well as a couple of fond memories—went with it. Hank Peterson was flying Joy Sun back to her post at the Kennedy Space Port’s Medical Center.

Nick reached down, driving one-handed as he slipped Wilhelmina from her hiding place.

He entered Cathay’s grounds through an automatic gate which lifted when the Lamborghini passed over a treadle. A tough-looking type in a green uniform came out of a kiosk, did a double take, and came running toward him, tugging at his service holster. Nick slowed. He stretched his right arm out, shoulder high, and squeezed the trigger. Wilhelmina bucked just a trifle and the GKI guard thudded face forward into the ground. Dust billowed up around him.

A second shot sounded and the Lamborghini’s windshield shattered, raining glass over Nick. He hit the brakes, opened the door and dived out in one smooth motion. He heard a gun roar behind him as he rolled and another bullet punched into the dust where his head had been. He spun a half-turn, then reversed the spin and came up shooting. Wilhelmina bucked twice in his hand, then twice more, coughing gutturally, and the four GKI guards coming around both sides of the kiosk went sprawling as the slugs struck home.

He swung around in a half crouch, left arm protecting his vitals in the approved FBI manner, the Luger held low, ready. But there was no

one else. The dust settled on the five bodies.

Had they heard the shots in the villa? Nick measured the distance with his eye, recalled the sound of the surf and doubted it. He walked over to the bodies and stood looking down at them. He had aimed high, resulting in five terminal cases. He chose the largest and hauled it into the kiosk.

The GKI uniform he put on got him close enough to the next set of guards to dispatch one with Hugo, the other with a karate chop to the neck. That got him inside the villa. The sound of TV and voices drew him along the deserted halls to a covered flagstone terrazza off the east wing...

A group of men stood in front of a portable TV set. They were wearing dark glasses and terrycloth robes and had towels looped around their necks. They seemed on the verge of heading toward a pool, visible just to the left of the terrazza, but something on the TV was holding them. It was a news commentator. He was saying: "We expect the announcement at any moment. Yes, here it is. It's just come in. The voice of NASA communicator Paul Jensen from Mission Control in Houston saying the Phoenix One mission has been scrubbed for twenty-four hours... .

"Dammitohell!" roared Simian. "Red, Reno!" he barked. "Get back down to Miami. We can't take any chances with that Carter guy. Johnny, get the launch out. I'm heading to the yacht."

Nick's hand closed over the large metal marble in his pocket. "Hold it," he rasped. "Nobody move." Four startled faces swung toward him. At the same instant he caught a sudden motion at the edge of his vision field. A couple of GKI guards who'd been lounging against the wall came springing toward him, swinging rifle butts. N3 gave the metal marble an abrupt twist. It went rolling across the flagstones toward them, hissing out its lethal gas.

The men froze in their tracks. Only their eyes moved.

Simian staggered backwards, clutching at his face. A bullet cut Nick's right earlobe. It came from the gun Red Sands was holding as he backed off the terrazza and out across the lawn, moving ahead of the deadly fumes. Killmaster's wrist flicked up. Hugo soared through the air, burying itself deep in Sands' chest. He went right on over in a backward somersault, crashing feet first into the swimming pool.

"My eyes!" Simian was bellowing.. "I can't see!"

Nick spun toward him. Reno Tree was supporting him by the shoulder, leading him off the terrazza. Nick started after them. Something hit his right shoulder like the flat of a board swung with incredible strength. The impact drove him down. He landed on his hands and knees. He felt no pain, but time slowed until everything could be seen in careful, minute detail. One of the things he saw was

Johnny Hung Fat standing over him, holding a table leg. He dropped it and ran off after Reno Tree and Simian.

The three of them went hurrying down the sweeping expanse of lawn, heading toward the boat house.

Nick climbed groggily to his feet. Pain washed over him in dark waves. He started after them but his legs collapsed. They wouldn't support him. He tried again. This time he managed to stay up, but he had to move slowly.

The speedboat's engine roared to life just as N3 reached the boat house. Hung Fat swung her out, spinning the wheel as he looked astern to watch his clearance. Simian sat hunched in the front seat beside him, fingers still clawing at his eyes. Reno Tree was in the rear seat. He saw Nick coming and swung around, reaching for something.

N3 sprinted the last ten yards, reaching up and swinging from a low-hanging beam overhead, flat-out on his face and stretching, kicking hard on the upswing and letting go while he was still rising. He came down on his toes on the edge of the speedboat's stern, arched, clawing frantically at the air.

He would have lost his balance if Reno Tree hadn't jabbed at him with the boat hook. Nick's hands clamped around the hook and pulled. The leverage swung him forward onto his knees and brought Tree twisting and squirming out of the rear seat like a hooked eel.

The boat burst out of darkness and into blinding sunlight, banking sharply to port, the water curving up around it on both sides in a great foam-topped wake, Reno had his gun out now, pointed at Nick. N3 brought the boat hook down. The bullet zipped harmlessly past his head and Reno screamed as his good hand dissolved into blood and bone. It was a woman's scream, so high-pitched as almost to be noiseless. Killmaster choked it oil with his hands.

His thumbs sank into the arteries at either side of Reno's straining throat. The wet, glistening wolf's mouth lolled open. The dead gray eyes bulged obscenely from their sockets. A bullet slammed past Nick's ear. His head rang from the concussion. He glanced up. Hung Fat had twisted around in his seat. He was steering with one hand, shooting with the other as the speedboat pounded across the inlet, engines screaming free and over-revving as the props spun in the air, then twisted back into the water.

"Look out!" Nick yelled. Hung Fat swung around. Killmaster's thumbs finished the job that someone else had once begun. They dug into Reno Tree's purple scar, almost piercing the thick, horny skin. The whites of the man's eyes flickered up. The tongue came out and lolled from the open mouth and there came a terrible gargling from deep in his lungs.

Another bullet whined past. Nick felt the wind of it. He undamped

his fingers from the dead man's throat and spun to the left. "Behind you!" he shouted. "Look out!" And this time he meant it. They were roaring between Simian's yacht and the breakwater and through the spray-flecked windshield he saw the nylon hawser tethering its bow to a piling. There was no more than a three-foot clearance and Hung Fat was out of his seat now, looming up over him for the kill.

"That's the oldest trick in the world," he grinned, and then suddenly there was a meaty thud and the Chinaman was horizontal in the air, with the boat going out from under him. Something came out of him, and Nick saw that it was his head. It splashed into the wake some twenty yards behind them and the headless body followed, sinking without a trace.

Nick swung around. He saw Simian grabbing blindly for the wheel. Too late. They were headed right into the breakwater. He dived over the side.

The blast wave hit him as he surfaced. Hot air fanned over him. Fragments of metal and plywood rained down. Something large crashed into the water near his head. Then, as his eardrums were relieved from the sonic pressure of the explosion, he heard the screams. Shrill, inhuman screams. A piece of flaming wreckage was climbing slowly up the jagged rocks of the breakwater. As Nick looked closer he saw that it was Simian. His arms were flapping at his sides. He was trying to beat the flames out but looked more like a huge bird trying to take off, a phoenix trying to rise from his own funeral pyre. Only he couldn't and fell back with a great, shuddering sigh and died ...

"Oh, Sam, look! There it goes. Isn't it beautiful?"

Nick Carter raised his head from the soft rolling cushions of her breasts. "There goes what?" he muttered indistinctly.

The TV set was on at the foot of the bed in their Miami Beach hotel room but he hadn't really noticed. His thoughts had been elsewhere—concentrating on a lovely, sunkissed redhead with tobacco brown skin and white hp-stick whose name was Cynthia something. He heard a voice now, talking rapidly, excitedly. "... an awesome orange fire roaring from the Saturn's eight nozzles as liquid oxygen and kerosene explode together. It's a perfect liftofi for the Phoenix One ..."

He stared at the set through bleary eyes, watching the enormous vehicle rise majestically from Merritt Island and arch out over the Atlantic on the start of its gigantic acceleration curve. Then he turned away, burying his face once again in the dark, fragrant valley between her breasts. "Now where were we before my vacation was so rudely interrupted?" he murmured.

"Sam Harmon!" Nick's Florida girl sounded shocked. "Sam, I'm

surprised at you.” But the shocked note turned languorous beneath his caresses. “Aren’t you even interested in our space program?” she groaned as her nails began to rake his back.

“Sure I am,” he grinned. “Stop me if that rocket starts coming this way.”

THE END